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The Works of Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen, William Archer, Edmund Gosse,
Edward Dowden, James Huneker

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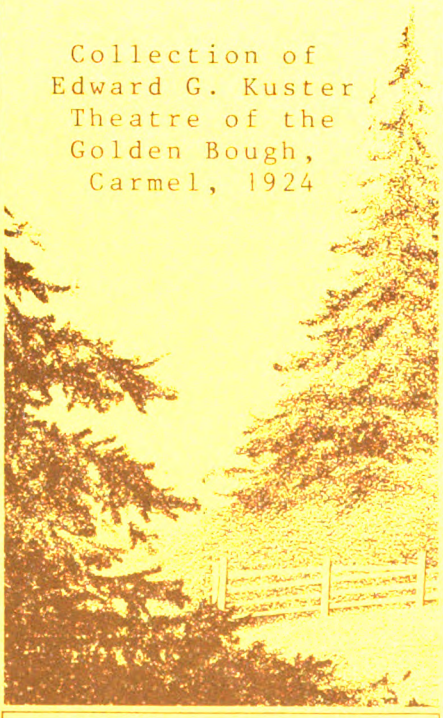

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THE WORKS OF HENRIK IBSEN

THE VIKING EDITION

VOLUME

II

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Laura Gundersen as Hiordis

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HENRIK IBSEN

THE VIKINGS AT HELGELAND THE PRETENDERS

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY

WILLIAM ARCHER

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1911

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LAURA GÜNDERSEN AS HIÖRDIS . . . . *Frontispiece*

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THE NAERÖFJORD 294

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THE VIKINGS AT HELGELAND

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THE VIKINGS AT HELGELAND

INTRODUCTION*

IBSEN himself has told us, in his preface to the second edition of *The Feast at Solhoug*, how the reading of the Icelandic family-sagas suggested to him, in germ, the theme of *The Vikings at Helgeland*. What he first saw, he says, was the contrasted figures of the two women who ultimately became Hiördis and Dagny, together with a great banquet-scene at which an interchange of taunts and gibes should lead to tragic consequences. The conception of the two women's characters was certainly not new to him, seeing that a similar contrast presents itself in his very earliest work, *Catilina*, between the aptly-named Furia and the gentle Aurelia; while even in *Lady Inger of Östråt* it reappears, somewhat disguised, in the contrast between Inger Gyldenlöve and her daughter Elina. While the scheme of *The Vikings* was still entirely vague, however, fresh influences, both of a personal and of a literary nature, intervened, and, transposing the theme from the purely dramatic into the lyrical key, he produced *The Feast at Solhoug*. The foster-sisters, Hiördis and Dagny, became the sisters Margit and Signë, and the banquet, instead of being the culminating-point of the dramatic action, became its mere background.

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The fact probably is that in 1855 the poet found himself still unripe for the intense effort of dramatic concentration involved in such a work as *The Vikings*. Probably, too, he knew that neither his actors nor his public at the Bergen Theatre were prepared to go back to the primitive austerity of the heroic age, as it was beginning to body itself forth in his mind. The good Bergensers were accustomed either to French intrigue (such as he had given them in *Lady Inger*) or to Danish lyrical romanticism; and he perhaps foresaw that the ruling taste of Bergen would be as hard to contend against as, in the sequel, the ruling taste of Copenhagen actually proved to be. At all events, from whatever mingling of motives, he put the heroic theme aside for two years, while he kept to the key of lyrical romanticism not only in the *Feast at Solhoug*, written in the summer of 1855, but also in the very feeble *Olaf Liliekrans*, conceived much earlier, but written in 1856. Not until he had left Bergen behind him, and returned to Christiania in the summer of 1857, did the poet take up again, and rapidly work out, the theme of *The Vikings*. It is almost inconceivable that only a year should have intervened between it and *Olaf Liliekrans*.

Paul Botten-Hansen, perhaps Ibsen's closest friend of those days, has stated that *The Vikings* was begun in verse. If so, the metre chosen was probably the twelve-syllable measure of Oehlenschläger's *Balder's Death*, supposed to represent the iambic trimeter of the Greek dramatists. In an essay *On the Heroic Ballad*, written in Bergen in the early months of 1857, Ibsen had condemned, as a medium for the treatment of Scandinavian themes,

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the iambic decasyllable (our blank verse) in which Oehlenschläger had written most of his plays, and which Ibsen himself had adopted in his early imitation of Oehlenschläger, *The Warrior's Barrow*. Blank verse Ibsen regarded as "entirely foreign" to Norwegian-Danish prosody, and, moreover, a product of Christian influences; whereas pagan antiquity, if treated in verse at all, ought to be treated in the pagan measure of the Greeks. At the same time we find him expressing a doubt whether Oehlenschläger's *Hakon Jarl* might not have been just as poetic in prose as in verse—a doubt which clearly shows in what direction his thoughts were turning. It must be regarded as a great mercy that he abandoned the iambic trimeter, which, in Oehlenschläger's hands, was nothing but an unrhymed Alexandrine with the cæsura displaced.

This same essay *On the Heroic Ballad* throws a curious light on the difficulties which occasioned the long delay between the conception and the execution of *The Vikings*. He lays it down that "the heroic ballad is much better fitted than the saga for dramatic treatment. The saga is a great, cold, rounded, and self-contained epos, essentially objective, and exclusive of all lyricism. . . . If, now, the poet is to extract a dramatic work from this epic material, he must necessarily bring into it a foreign, a lyrical, element; for the drama is well known to be a higher blending of the lyric and the epos." This "well-known" dogma he probably accepted from the German æstheticians with whom, about this time, he seems to have busied himself. A little further on, he adds that the accommodating prosody of the ballads gives room for

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"many freedoms which are of great importance to dramatic dialogue," and consequently prophesies a great future for the drama drawn from this source. It was a luckless prophecy. He himself, though apparently he little guessed it, had done his last work in lyrical romance; and though it has survived, sporadically, in Danish and even in German literature, it can count but few masterpieces during the past half-century. Perhaps, however, Hauptmann's *Sunken Bell* might be taken as justifying Ibsen's forecast.[1]

It must have been very soon after this essay was published (May 1857) that Ibsen discovered how to impose dramatic form upon the epic material of the sagas, without dragging in any foreign lyrical element. He suddenly saw his way, it would seem, to reproducing in dialogue the terse, unvarnished prose of the sagas themselves, eloquent in reticence rather than in rhetorical or lyrical abundance.

Had he, or had he not, in the meantime read Björnson's one-act play, *Between the Battles?* It was not produced until October 27, 1857, by which time *The Vikings* must have been almost, if not quite, finished. But Ibsen may have seen it in manuscript several months earlier, and it may have put him on the track of the form in which to cast his saga-material. The style of *The Vikings* is incomparably firmer, purer, more homogeneous and clear-cut than that of *Between the Battles;* but Björnson's mediæval comedietta (it is really little more) may quite

[1] Though he himself wrote no more plays in the key of *The Feast at Solhoug*, the "accommodating prosody" of the ballads had doubtless its influence on the metres of *Peer Gynt*.

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well have given Ibsen a valuable impulse towards the adaptation of the saga-style to drama. The point, however, is of little moment. It is much more important to note that while Ibsen was writing *The Vikings* Björnson was writing his peasant-idyll *Synnöve Solbakken;* so that these two corner-stones of modern Norwegian literature were laid, to all intents and purposes, simultaneously.

In an autobiographic letter to Peter Hansen,[1] written in 1870, Ibsen mentions this play very briefly: "*The Vikings at Helgeland* I wrote whilst I was engaged to be married. For Hiördis I had the same model as I took afterwards for Svanhild in *Love's Comedy*." More noteworthy is his preface to a German translation of the play, published in 1876. It runs as follows:

"In issuing a German translation of one of my earlier dramatic works, it may not be superfluous to remark that I have taken the material of this play, not from the *Nibelungenlied*, but in part—and in part only—from a kindred Scandinavian source, the *Volsung-Saga*. More essentially, however, my poem may be said to be founded upon the various Icelandic family-sagas, in which it often seems that the titanic conditions and occurrences of the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Volsung-Saga* have simply been reduced to human dimensions. Hence I think we may conclude that the situations and events depicted in these two documents were typically characteristic of our common Germanic life in the earliest historical times. If this view be justified, it disposes of the reproach that in the present drama our national mythic world is brought down to a lower plane than that to which it belongs. The

[1] *Correspondence*, Letter 74.

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idealised, and in some degree impersonal, myth-figures are exceedingly ill-adapted for representation on the stage of to-day; and, however this may be, it was not my aim to present our mythic world, but simply our life in primitive times."

The reasoning of this passage does not seem very cogent; but it expresses clearly enough the design which the poet proposed to himself. Before discussing the merits of the play, however, I may as well complete the outline of its external history.

Part of that external history is written by Ibsen himself in letters to the Christiania Press of the day. In the autumn of 1857, he presented the play to the Christiania Theatre, then occupied by a Danish company under Danish management. After a long delay, he ascertained that it had been accepted and would be produced in March, 1858. He then proposed to consult with the manager as to the casting of the piece, but found that that functionary had no clear conception of either the plot or the characters, and therefore left him a couple of months in which to study it. At the end of that time the poet again reminded the potentate of his existence, and learned that "since the economic status and prospects of the theatre did not permit of its paying fees for original works," the proposed production could not take place. Ibsen hints that, had the choice been offered him, he would have consented to the performance of the piece without fee or reward. As the choice was not offered him, he regarded the whole episode as a move in the anti-national policy of the Danish management; and the controversy which arose out of the incident doubtless con-

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tributed to the nationalisation of the Christiania Theatre —the supersession of Danish by Norwegian managers, actors and authors—which took place during the succeeding decade.

In the meantime, almost simultaneously with the rejection of the play by the Christiania Theatre, it was rejected by the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. The director, J. L. Heiberg, was then regarded as an autocrat in the æsthetic world; and his report on *The Vikings* is now a curiosity of literature. He declared that nothing was so "monotonous, tiresome and devoid of all poetry" as the Icelandic family-sagas; he could not endure their "wildness and rawness" on the stage; the saga-style, as reproduced by Ibsen, seemed to him "mannered and affected"; and he concluded his judgment in these terms: "A Norwegian theatre will scarcely take its rise from such experiments, and the Danish theatre has fortunately no need for them."

The play was published in April, 1858, as a supplement to a Christiania illustrated paper, the author receiving an "honorarium" of something less than £7. On November 24, 1858, it was produced at the little "Norwegian Theatre" in Christiania, of which the poet was then director. At the Bergen Theatre it was produced in 1859, at the Christiania Theatre (by that time pretty well Norwegianised) in 1861. It did not make its way to Copenhagen and Stockholm until 1875. In 1876 it was acted at the Court Theatres of Munich and Dresden, and at the Vienna Burgtheater. Thenceforward it was pretty frequently seen on the German stage; but it does not seem to have reached Berlin (Deutsches Theater) until 1890.

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In 1892 it was produced in Moscow. The only production in the English language of which any account has reached me took place in 1903 at the Imperial Theatre, London, when Miss Ellen Terry appeared as Hiördis and Mr. Oscar Asche as Sigurd. The scenery and dresses were designed by Miss Terry's son, Mr. Gordon Craig.

It would need not merely an essay, but a volume, to discuss the relation of *The Vikings* to its mythic material, and to other modern treatments of that material—Friedrich Hebbel's *Die Nibelungen*, Richard Wagner's *Ring der Nibelungen*, etc. The poet's actual indebtedness to the *Volsung-Saga* is well summarised by Henrik Jæger in his *Life of Ibsen*: "Like Sigurd Fafnir's-bane," he says, "Sigurd Viking has achieved the deed which Hiördis (Brynhild) demands of the man who shall wed her; and, again like his heroic namesake, he has renounced her in favour of his foster-brother, Gunnar, himself taking another to wife. This other woman reveals the secret in the course of an altercation with Hiördis (Brynhild), who, in consequence of this discovery, brings about Sigurd's death and her own. The reader will observe that we must keep to very general terms if they are to fit both the saga and the drama. Are there any further coincidences? Yes, one. After Gudrun has betrayed the secret, there comes a scene in which she seeks to appease Brynhild, and begs her to think no more of it; then follows a scene in which Sigurd explains to Brynhild how it all happened; and finally a scene in which Brynhild goads Gunnar to kill Sigurd. All these scenes have their parallels in the third act of *The Vikings;* but their order is different, and none of their wording has been

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adopted." From the family-sagas, again, not only the stature of the characters, so to speak, but several details of incident and dialogue are borrowed. The boasting-match at Gunnar's feast, which, as we have seen, was one of the first elements of the story to present itself to Ibsen's mind, has many analogies in Icelandic lore. Örnulf's questions as to how Thorolf fell are borrowed from *Egils Saga*, and so is the idea of his "drapa," or funeral chant over his dead sons. Sigurd and Hiördis are, perhaps, almost as closely related to Kiartan and Gudrun in the *Laxdæla Saga* as to Sigurd's Fafnir's-bane and Brynhild. Indeed, Ibsen seems to have reckoned too confidently on the unfamiliarity of his public with the stores of material upon which he drew. Not, of course, that there could be any question of plagiarism. The sagas were as legitimately at Ibsen's service as were Plutarch and Holinshed at Shakespeare's. But having been himself, as he tells us, almost ignorant of the existence of these sagas until he came across N. M. Petersen's translation of them, he forgot that people who had long known and loved them might resent the removal of this trait and that from its original setting, and might hold it to be, in its new context, degraded and sentimentalised. "It may be," writes H. H. Boyesen, in his generally depreciatory remarks on the play, "that my fondness for these sagas themselves prevents me from relishing the modification and remoulding to which Ibsen has subjected them." Dr. Brandes, too, points to a particular instance in which the sense of degradation could not but be felt. The day-dream as to the hair-woven bowstring which Hiördis relates to Sigurd in the third act (p. 105) is in itself effective

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enough; but any one who knows the splendid passage in *Nials Saga*, on which it is founded, cannot but feel that the actual (or at any rate legendary) event is impoverished by being dragged in under the guise of a mere morbid fantasy.

On the whole, I think Ibsen can scarcely escape the charge of having sentimentalised the sagas in the same way, though not in the same degree, in which Tennyson has sentimentalised the Arthurian legends. Indeed, Sigurd the Strong is not without points of resemblance to the Blameless King of the *Idylls*. But, for my part, I cannot regard this as a very serious charge. *The Vikings* is the work of a man still young (29), who had, moreover, developed very slowly. It is still steeped in romanticism, though not in the almost boyish lyricism of its predecessors. The poet is not yet intellectually mature—very far from it. But here, for the first time, we are unmistakably face to face with a great imagination and a specifically dramatic endowment of the first order. The germs of promise discernible in *Lady Inger* have ripened into rare technical mastery.

Ibsen was doubtless right in feeling that the superhuman figures of the mythical sagas were impossible on the non-musical stage, just as Wagner was right in feeling that the world of myth could be embodied only in an atmosphere of music. The reduction, then, of the Volsungs and Niblungs to the stature of the men of the family-sagas was not only judicious, but necessary. But was it judicious to go to the myth-sagas for the initial idea of a play which had to be developed in terms of the family-sagas? Scarcely, I think. The weak points in the struc-

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ture of the story are precisely those at which the poet has had to replace supernatural by natural machinery. To slay a dragon and to break through a wall of fire, even with magical aid, are exploits which we can accept, on the mythic plane, as truly stupendous. But it is impossible to be really impressed by the slaying of Hiördis's bear, or to share in the breathless admiration with which that achievement is always mentioned. If the bear is to be regarded as a fabulous monster, it might just as well be a dragon at once; if it is to be accepted as a real quadruped, the killing of it is no such mighty matter. We feel it, in fact, to be a mere substitute, a more or less ludicrous makeshift. And in the same way, Sigurd's renunciation of Hiördis becomes very difficult to accept when all supernatural agency—magic potion, or other sleight of wizardy—is eliminated. We feel that he behaves like a nincompoop in despairing of winning her for himself, merely because she does not show an obviously "coming on" disposition, and like an immoral sentimentalist in handing her over to Gunnar. This, to be sure, is the poet's own criticism of his action. The lie which Sigurd and Gunnar conspire to tell, or rather to enact, is the root of the whole tragedy. We have here Ibsen's first treatment of the theme with which he is afterwards so much concerned—the necessity of truth as the basis of every human relation. Gunnar's acquiescence in Sigurd's heroic mendacity is as clearly condemned and punished, as, in *Pillars of Society*, Bernick's acquiescence in Johan's almost equally heroic self-sacrifice. Both plays convey a warning against excesses of altruism, and show that we have no right to offer sacrifices which the person benefit-

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ing by them has no right to accept. But to indicate a correct moral judgment of Sigurd's action is not to make it psychologically plausible. We feel, I repeat, that the poet is trying in vain to rationalise a series of actions which are comprehensible only on the supernatural plane.

This unreality of plot involved a similar unreality, or at any rate extreme simplicity, of characterisation. All the personages are drawn in large, obvious traits, which never undergo the smallest modification. Sigurd is throughout the magnanimous hero, Dagny the submissive, amiable wife, Hiördis the valkyrie-virago, Gunnar the well-meaning weakling, not cowardly but inefficient. By far the most human and most individual figure is old Örnulf, in whom the spirit of the family-sagas is magnificently incarnated. We feel throughout the inexperience of the author, his incuriousness of half-tones in character, his tendency to view human relations and problems in a purely sentimental light. To compare Hiördis with Hedda Gabler, Sigurd with Halvard Solness, is to realise what an immeasurable process of evolution the poet was destined to go through. Indeed, we as yet seem far enough off even from Duke Skule and Bishop Nicholas.

But the man of inventive imagination and the man of the theatre are already here in all their strength. Whatever motives and suggestions Ibsen found in the sagas, the construction of the play is all his own and is quite masterly. Exposition, development, the carrying on of the interest from act to act—all this is perfect in its kind. The play is "well-made" in the highest sense of the word. Already the poet shows himself consummate in his art of gradually lifting veil after veil from the past, and mak-

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ing each new discovery involve a more or less striking change in the relations of the persons on the stage. But it is not technically alone that the play is great. The whole second act is a superbly designed and modulated piece of drama; and, for pure nobility and pathos, the scene of Örnulf's return—entirely of the poet's own invention—is surely one of the greatest things in dramatic literature. It is marvellous that even æsthetic prejudice should have prevented a man like J. L. Heiberg from recognising that he was here in presence of a great poet. The interest of the third act is mainly psychological, and the psychology, as we have seen, is neither very profound nor very convincing. But the fourth act, again, rises to a great height of romantic impressiveness. Whatever hints may have come from the sagas, the picture of Örnulf's effort of self-mastery is a very noble piece of work; and the plunge into supernaturalism at the close, in the child's vision of Asgårdsreien, with his mother leading the rout, seems to me an entirely justified piece of imaginative daring. I cannot even agree with Dr. Brandes in condemning as "Geheimniskrämerei" Sigurd's dying revelation of the fact that he is a Christian. It seems to me to harmonise entirely with the whole sentimental colouring of the play. The worst flaws I find in this act are the terrible asides placed in the mouths of Gunnar and Dagny after the discovery of Sigurd's death.

The word *Vikings* in the title is a very free rendering of *Hærmændene*, which simply means "warriors." As "warriors," however, is a colourless word, and as Örnulf, Sigurd, and Gunnar all are, or have been, actually

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vikings, the substitution seemed justifiable. I would beg, however hopelessly, that "viking" should be pronounced so as to rhyme *not* with "liking" but with "seeking," or at worst with "kicking." Helgeland, it may be mentioned, is a province or district in the north of Norway.

Örnulf's "drapa" and his snatches of verse are rhymed as well as alliterated in the original. I had the less hesitation in suppressing the rhyme, as it was actually foreign to the practice of the skalds.

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THE VIKINGS AT HELGELAND
(1858)

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CHARACTERS

ÖRNULF OF THE FIORDS, *an Icelandic Chieftain.*
SIGURD THE STRONG, *a Sea-King.*
GUNNAR HEADMAN,[1] *a rich yeoman of Helgeland.*
THOROLF, *Örnulf's youngest son.*
DAGNY, *Örnulf's daughter.*
HIÖRDIS, *his foster-daughter.*
KÅRE THE PEASANT, *a Helgeland-man.*
EGIL, *Gunnar's son, four years old.*
ÖRNULF'S SIX OLDER SONS.
ÖRNULF'S AND SIGURD'S MEN.
Guests, house-carls, serving-maids, outlaws, etc.

The action takes place in the time of Erik Blood-axe (about 933 A.D.) *at, and in the neighbourhood of, Gunnar's house, on the island of Helgeland, in the north of Norway.*

Pronunciation of Names: Helgeland = Helgheland; Örnulf = Ornoolf; Sigurd = Sigoord; Gunnar = Goonnar; Thorolf = Toorolf; Hiördis = Yördeess; Kåre = Koarë; Egil = Ayghil. The letter "ö" as in German.

[1] Failing to find a better equivalent for the Norwegian "Herse," I have used the word "Headman" wherever it seemed necessary to give Gunnar a title or designation. He is generally spoken of as "Gunnar Herse" in the Norwegian text; but where it could be done without inconvenience, the designation has here been omitted.

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THE VIKINGS AT HELGELAND

PLAY IN FOUR ACTS

ACT FIRST

A rocky coast, running precipitously down to the sea at the back. To the left, a boat-house; to the right, rocks and pinewoods. The masts of two warships can be seen down in the cove. Far out to the right, the sea, dotted with reefs and skerries, on which the surf is running high; it is a stormy snow-grey winter-day.

SIGURD *comes up from the ships; he is clad in a white tunic with a silver belt, a blue cloak, cross-gartered hose, untanned brogues, and a steel cap; at his side hangs a short sword.* ÖRNULF *comes in sight immediately afterwards, high up among the rocks, clad in a dark lamb-skin tunic with a breastplate and greaves, woollen stockings, and untanned brogues; over his shoulders he has a cloak of brown frieze, with the hood drawn over his steel cap, so that his face is partly hidden. He is very tall and massively built, with a long white beard, but is somewhat bowed by age; his weapons are a round shield, sword, and spear.*

SIGURD *enters first, looks around, sees the boat-shed, goes quickly up to it, and tries to burst open the door.*

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ÖRNULF.

[*Appears among the rocks, starts on seeing* SIGURD, *seems to recognise him, descends and cries:*] Give place, Viking!

SIGURD.

[*Turns, lays his hand on his sword, and answers:*] 'Twere the first time if I did!

ÖRNULF.

Thou shalt and must! I need the shelter for my stiff-frozen men.

SIGURD.

And I for a weary woman!

ÖRNULF.

My men are worth more than thy women!

SIGURD.

Then must outlaws be highly prized in Helgeland!

ÖRNULF.

[*Raising his spear.*] Thou shalt pay dear for that word!

SIGURD.

[*Drawing his sword.*] Now will it go ill with thee, old man!

[ÖRNULF *rushes upon him;* SIGURD *defends himself.*

DAGNY *and some of* SIGURD'S *men come up from the strand;* ÖRNULF'S *six sons appear on the rocks to the right.*

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DAGNY.

[*Who is a little in front, clad in a red kirtle, blue cloak, and fur hood, calls down to the ships:*] Up, all Sigurd's men! My husband is fighting with a stranger!

ÖRNULF'S SONS.

Help! Help for our father! [*They descend.*

SIGURD.

[*To his men.*] Hold! I can master him alone!

ÖRNULF.

[*To his sons.*] Let me fight in peace! [*Rushes in upon* SIGURD.] I will see thy blood!

SIGURD

First see thine own!

[*Wounds him in the arm so that his spear falls.*

ÖRNULF.

A stout stroke, Viking!
Swift the sword thou swingest,
keen thy blows and biting;
Sigurd's self, the Stalwart,
stood before thee shame-struck.

SIGURD.

[*Smiling.*] Then were his shame his glory!

ÖRNULF'S SONS.

[*With a cry of wonder.*] Sigurd himself! Sigurd the Strong!

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ÖRNULF.

But sharper was thy stroke that night thou didst bear away Dagny, my daughter.

[*Casts his hood back.*

SIGURD AND HIS MEN.

Örnulf of the Fiords!

DAGNY.

[*Glad, yet uneasy.*] My father and my brothers!

SIGURD.

Stand thou behind me.

ÖRNULF.

Nay, no need. [*Approaching* SIGURD.] I no sooner saw thee than I knew thee, and therefore I stirred the strife; I was fain to prove the fame that tells of thee as the stoutest man of his hands in Norway. Hereafter let peace be between us.

SIGURD.

Best if so it could be.

ÖRNULF.

Here is my hand. Thou art a warrior indeed; stouter strokes than these has old Örnulf never given or taken.

SIGURD.

[*Seizes his outstretched hand.*] Let them be the last strokes given and taken between us two; and be thou thyself the judge in the matter between us. Art willing?

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ÖRNULF.

That am I, and straightway shall the quarrel be healed. [*To the others.*] Be the matter, then, known to all. Five winters ago came Sigurd and Gunnar Headman as vikings to Iceland; they lay in harbour close under my homestead. Then Gunnar, by force and craft, carried away my foster-daughter, Hiördis; but thou, Sigurd, didst take Dagny, my own child, and sailed with her over the sea. For that I now doom thee to pay three hundred pieces of silver, and thereby shall thy misdeed be atoned.

SIGURD.

Fair is thy judgment, Örnulf; the three hundred pieces will I pay, and add thereto a silken cloak fringed with gold. 'Tis a gift from King Æthelstan of England, and better has no Icelander yet borne.

DAGNY.

Well said, my brave husband; and my father, I thank thee. Now at last is my mind at ease.

[*She presses her father's and brothers' hands, and talks low to them.*

ÖRNULF.

Then thus stands the troth between us; and from this day shall Dagny be to the full as honourably regarded as though she had been lawfully betrothed to thee, with the good will of her kin.

SIGURD.

And in me canst thou trust, as in one of thine own blood.

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ÖRNULF.

That I doubt not, and will forthwith prove thy friendship.

SIGURD.

Ready shalt thou find me; say, what dost thou crave?

ÖRNULF.

Thy help in rede and deed. I have sailed hither to Helgeland to seek out Gunnar Headman and call him to account for the carrying away of Hiördis.

SIGURD.

[*Surprised.*] Gunnar!

DAGNY.

[*In the same tone.*] And Hiördis—where are they?

ÖRNULF.

In Gunnar's homestead, I trow.

SIGURD.

And it is——?

ÖRNULF.

Not many bow-shots hence; did ye not know?

SIGURD.

[*With suppressed emotion.*] No, truly! I have had scant tidings of Gunnar since we sailed from Iceland

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together. While I have wandered far and wide and served many outland kings, Gunnar has stayed at home. We made the land here at daydawn, storm-driven. I knew, indeed, that Gunnar's homestead lay here in the north, but——

DAGNY.

[*To* ÖRNULF.] So that errand has brought thee hither?

ÖRNULF.

That and no other. [*To* SIGURD.] Our meeting is the work of the Mighty Ones above; they willed it so. Had I wished to find thee, little knew I where to seek.

SIGURD.

[*Thoughtfully.*] True, true!—But concerning Gunnar—tell me, Örnulf, art thou minded to go sharply to work, with all thy might, be it for good or ill?

ÖRNULF.

That must I. Listen, Sigurd, for thus it stands: Last summer I rode to the Council where many honourable men were met. When the Council-days were over, I sat in the hall and drank with the men of my shire, and the talk fell upon the carrying-away of the women; scornful words they gave me, because for all these years I had let that wrong rest unavenged. Then, in my wrath, I swore to sail to Norway, seek out Gunnar, and crave reckoning or revenge, and never again to set foot in Iceland till my claim was made good.

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SIGURD.

Ay, ay, since so it stands, I see well that if need be the matter must be pressed home.

ÖRNULF.

It must; but I shall not crave overmuch, and Gunnar has the fame of an honourable man. I am glad, too, that I set forth on this quest; the time lay heavy on me in Iceland; out upon the blue waters had I grown old and grey, and meseemed that I must fare forth once again before I——; well well—Bergthora, my good wife, was dead these many years; my elder sons sailed on viking-ventures summer by summer; and since Thorolf was growing up——

DAGNY.

[*Joyfully.*] Thorolf is with thee? Where is he?

ÖRNULF.

On board the ship. [*Points towards the background, to the right.*] Scarce shalt thou know the boy again, so stout and strong and fair has he grown. He will be a mighty warrior, Sigurd; one day he will equal thee.

DAGNY.

[*Smiling.*] I see it is now as ever: Thorolf stands nearest thy heart.

ÖRNULF.

He is the youngest, and like his mother; therefore it is.

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SIGURD.

But tell me—thy errand to Gunnar—thinkest thou to-day——?

ÖRNULF.

Rather to-day than to-morrow. Fair amends will content me; should Gunnar say me nay, then must he abide what may follow.

KÅRE THE PEASANT *enters hastily from the right; he is clad in a grey frieze cloak and low-brimmed felt hat; he carries in his hand a broken fence-rail.*

KÅRE.

Well met, Vikings

ÖRNULF.

Vikings are seldom well met.

KÅRE.

If ye be honourable men, ye will grant me refuge among you; Gunnar Headman's house-carls are hunting me to slay me.

ÖRNULF.

Gunnar's?

SIGURD.

Then hast thou done him some wrong!

KÅRE.

I have done myself right. Our cattle grazed together upon an island, hard by the coast; Gunnar's men carried

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off my best oxen, and one of them flouted me for a thrall. Then I raised my sword against him and slew him.

ÖRNULF.

That was a lawful deed.

KÅRE.

But this morning his men came in arms against me. By good hap I heard of their coming, and fled; but my foemen are on my tracks, and short shrift can I look for at their hands.

SIGURD.

Ill can I believe thee, peasant! In bygone days I knew Gunnar as I know myself, and this I wot, that never did he wrong to a peaceful man.

KÅRE.

Gunnar has no part in this wrong-doing; he is in the southland; nay, it is Hiördis his wife——

DAGNY.

Hiördis!

ÖRNULF.

[*To himself.*] Ay, ay, 'tis like her!

KÅRE.

I offered Gunnar amends for the thrall, and he was willing; but then came Hiördis, and egged her husband on with many scornful words, and hindered the peace. Since then has Gunnar gone to the south, and to-day——

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SIGURD.

[*Looking out to the left.*] Here comes a band of wayfarers towards the north. Is it not——?

KÅRE.

It is Gunnar himself!

ÖRNULF.

Be of good heart; I trow I can make peace between you.

GUNNAR HEADMAN, *with several men, enters from the left. He is in peaceful attire, wearing a brown tunic, cross-gartered hose, a blue mantle, and a broad hat; he has no weapon but a small axe.*

GUNNAR.

[*Stops in surprise and uncertainty on seeing the knot of men.*] Örnulf of the Fiords! Yes, surely——!

ÖRNULF.

Thou seest aright.

GUNNAR.

[*Approaching.*] Then peace and welcome to thee in my land, if thou come in peace.

ÖRNULF.

If thy will be as mine, there shall be no strife between us.

SIGURD.

[*Standing forward.*] Well met, Gunnar!

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GUNNAR.

[*Gladly.*] Sigurd—foster-brother! [*Shakes his hand.*] Now truly, since thou art here, I know that Örnulf comes in peace. [*To* ÖRNULF.] Give me thy hand, greybeard! Thy errand here in the north is lightly guessed: it concerns Hiördis, thy foster-daughter.

ÖRNULF.

As thou sayest; great wrong was done me when thou didst bear her away from Iceland without my will.

GUNNAR.

Thy claim is rightful; what the youth has marred, the man must mend. Long have I looked for thee, Örnulf, for this cause; and if amends content thee, we shall soon be at one.

SIGURD.

So deem I too. Örnulf will not press thee over hard.

GUNNAR.

[*Warmly.*] Nay, Örnulf, didst thou crave her full worth, all my goods were not enough!

ÖRNULF.

I shall go by law and usage, be sure of that. But now another matter. [*Pointing to* KÅRE.] Seest thou yonder man?

GUNNAR.

Kåre! [*To* ÖRNULF.] Thou knowest, then, that there is a strife between us?

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ORNULF.

Thy men have stolen his cattle, and theft must be atoned.

GUNNAR.

Murder no less; he has slain my thrall.

KÅRE.

Because he flouted me.

GUNNAR.

I have offered thee terms of peace.

KÅRE.

But Hiördis had no mind to that, and this morning, whilst thou wert gone, she fell upon me and now hunts me to my death.

GUNNAR.

[*Angrily.*] Sayest thou true? Has she——?

KÅRE.

True, every word.

ÖRNULF.

Therefore the peasant besought me to stand by him, and that will I do.

GUNNAR.

[*After a moment's thought.*] Thou hast dealt honourably with me, Örnulf; therefore it is fit that I should

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yield to thy will. Hear then, Kåre: I am willing to let the slaying of the thrall and the wrongs done toward thee quit each other.

KÅRE.

[*Gives* GUNNAR *his hand.*] It is a good offer; I am content.

ÖRNULF.

And he shall have peace for thee and thine?

GUNNAR.

Peace shall he have, both at home and wheresoever he may go.

SIGURD.

[*Pointing to the right.*] See yonder!

GUNNAR.

[*Disturbed.*] It is Hiördis!

ÖRNULF.

With armed men!

KÅRE.

She is seeking me!

HIÖRDIS *enters, with a troop of house-carls. She is clad in black, wearing a kirtle, cloak, and hood; the men are armed with swords and axes; she herself carries a light spear.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*Stops on entering.*] We meet here in force, meseems.

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DAGNY.

[*Rushes to meet her.*] Peace and joy to thee, Hiördis!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Coldly.*] I thank thee.—'Twas told me thou wert not far off. [*Comes forward, looking sharply at those assembled.*] Gunnar, and—Kåre, my foeman—Örnulf and his sons, and—— [*As she catches sight of* SIGURD, *she starts almost imperceptibly, is silent a moment, but collects herself and says:*] Many I see here who are known to me—but little I know who is best minded towards me.

ÖRNULF.

We are all well-minded towards thee.

HIÖRDIS.

If so be, thou wilt not deny to give Kåre into my husband's hands.

ÖRNULF.

There is no need.

GUNNAR.

There is peace and friendship between us.

HIÖRDIS.

[*With suppressed scorn.*] Friendship? Well well, I know thou art a wise man, Gunnar! Kåre has found mighty friends, and doubtless thou deem'st it safest——

GUNNAR.

Thy taunts avail not! [*With dignity.*] Kåre is at peace for us!

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Restraining herself.*] Well and good; if thou hast sworn him peace, the vow must be held.

GUNNAR.

[*Forcibly, but without anger.*] It must and it shall.

ÖRNULF.

[*To* HIÖRDIS.] Another pact had been well-nigh made ere thy coming.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Sharply.*] Between thee and Gunnar?

ÖRNULF.

[*Nods.*] It had to do with thee.

HIÖRDIS.

Well can I guess what it had to do with; but this I tell thee, foster-father, never shall it be said that Gunnar let himself be cowed because thou camest in arms to the isle. Hadst thou come alone, a single wayfarer, to our hall, the quarrel had more easily been healed.

GUNNAR.

Örnulf and his sons come in peace.

HIÖRDIS.

Mayhap; but will it sound otherwise in the mouths of men; and thou thyself, Gunnar, didst show scant trust in the peace yesterday, in sending our son Egil to the

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southland so soon as it was told us that Örnulf's warship lay in the fiord.

SIGURD.

[*To* GUNNAR.] Didst thou send thy son to the south?

HIÖRDIS.

Ay, that he might be in safety should Örnulf fall upon us.

ÖRNULF.

Scoff not at that, Hiördis; what Gunnar has done may prove wise in the end, if so be thou hinder the pact.

HIÖRDIS.

Life must take its chance; come what will, I had liever die than save my life by a shameful pact.

DAGNY.

Sigurd makes atonement, and will not be deemed the lesser man for that.

HIÖRDIS.

Sigurd best knows what his own honour can bear.

SIGURD.

On that score shall I never need reminding.

HIÖRDIS.

Sigurd has done famous deeds, but bolder than all was Gunnar's deed, when he slew the white bear that guarded my bower.

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GUNNAR.

[*With an embarrassed glance at* SIGURD.] Nay, nay, no more of that!

ÖRNULF.

In truth it was the boldest deed that e'er was seen in Iceland; and therefore——

SIGURD.

The more easily can Gunnar yield, and ne'er be held faint-hearted.

HIÖRDIS.

If amends are to be made, amends shall be craved as well. Bethink thee, Gunnar, of thy vow!

GUNNAR.

That vow was ill bethought; wilt thou hold me to it?

HIÖRDIS.

That will I, if we two are to dwell under one roof after this day. Know then, Örnulf, that if atonement is to be made for the carrying away of thy foster-daughter, thou, too, must atone for the slaying of Jökul my father, and the seizing of all his goods and gear.

ÖRNULF.

Jökul was slain in fair fight;[1] thy kinsmen did me a worse wrong when they sent thee to Iceland and

[1] "I ærlig holmgang." The established form of duel in the viking times was to land the combatants on one of the rocky islets or "holms" that stud the Norwegian coast, and there let them fight it out. Hence "holmgang" = duel.

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beguiled me into adopting[1] thee, unwitting who thou wert.

HIÖRDIS.

Honour, and no wrong, was thy lot in fostering Jökul's daughter.

ÖRNULF.

Nought but strife hast thou brought me, that I know.

HIÖRDIS.

Sterner strife may be at hand, if——

ÖRNULF.

I came not hither to bandy words with women!—Gunnar, hear my last word: art willing to make atonement?

HIÖRDIS.

[*To* GUNNAR.] Think of thy vow!

GUNNAR.

[*To* ÖRNULF.] Thou hearest, I have sworn a vow, and that must I——

ÖRNULF.

[*Irritated.*] Enough, enough! Never shall it be said that I made atonement for slaying in fair fight.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Forcibly.*] Then we defy thee and thine.

[1] "At knæsætte" = to knee-set a child, to take it on one's knee, an irrevocable form of adoption.

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ÖRNULF.

[*In rising wrath.*] And who has the right to crave atonement for Jökul? Where are his kinsmen? There is none alive! Where is his lawful avenger?

HIÖRDIS.

That is Gunnar, on my behalf.

ÖRNULF.

Gunnar! Ay, hadst thou been betrothed to him with thy foster-father's good-will, or had he made atonement for carrying thee away, then were he thy father's lawful avenger; but——

DAGNY.

[*Apprehensive and imploring.*] Father, father!

SIGURD.

[*Quickly.*] Speak it not!

ÖRNULF.

[*Raising his voice.*] Nay, loudly shall it be spoken! A woman wedded by force has no lawful husband!

GUNNAR.

[*Vehemently.*] Örnulf!

HIÖRDIS.

[*In a wild outburst.*] Flouted and shamed! [*In a quivering voice.*] This—this shalt thou come to rue!

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ÖRNULF.

[*Continuing.*] A woman wedded by force is in law no more than a leman! Wilt thou regain thine honour, then must thou——

HIÖRDIS.

[*Controlling herself.*] Nay, Örnulf, I know better what is fitting. If I am to be held as Gunnar's leman —well and good, then must he win me honour by his deeds—by deeds so mighty that my shame shall be shame no more! And thou, Örnulf, beware! Here our ways part, and from this day shall I make war at all times upon thee and thine; thou shalt know no safety for life or limb, thou, nor any whom thou—— [*Looking fiercely at* KÅRE.] Kåre! Örnulf has stood thy friend, forsooth, and there is peace between us; but I counsel thee not to seek thy home yet awhile; the man thou slewest has many avengers, and it well might befall—— See, I have shown thee the danger; thou must e'en take what follows. Come, Gunnar, we must gird ourselves for the fight. A famous deed didst thou do in Iceland, but greater deeds must be done here, if thou wouldst not have thy—thy leman shrink with shame from thee and from herself!

GUNNAR.

Curb thyself, Hiördis; it is unseemly to bear thee thus!

DAGNY.

[*Imploringly.*] Stay, foster-sister—stay; I will appease my father.

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Without listening to her.*] Homewards, homewards! Who could have foretold me that I should wear out my life as a worthless leman? But if I am to bear this life of shame, ay, even for one day more, then must my husband do such a deed—such a deed as shall make his name more famous than all other names of men.

[*Goes out to the right.*

GUNNAR.

[*Softly.*] Sigurd, promise me this, that we shall have speech together ere thou leave the land.

[*Goes out with his men to the right.*

[*The storm has meanwhile ceased; the midday sun is now visible, like a red disc, low upon the rim of the sea.*

ÖRNULF.

[*Threateningly.*] Thou shalt pay dear for this day's work, foster-daughter!

DAGNY.

Father, father! Surely thou wilt not harm her!

ÖRNULF.

Let me be! Now, Sigurd, now can no amends avail between Gunnar and me.

SIGURD.

What thinkest thou to do?

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ÖRNULF.

That I know not; but far and wide shall the tale be told how Örnulf of the Fiords came to Gunnar's hall.

SIGURD.

[*With quiet determination.*] Maybe; but this I tell thee, Örnulf, thou shalt never bear arms against him so long as I am alive.

ÖRNULF.

So, so! And what if nought else be my will?

SIGURD.

It shall not be—let thy will be never so strong.

ÖRNULF.

[*Angrily.*] Go then; join thou with my foes; I dare outface the twain of you!

SIGURD.

Hear me out, Örnulf; the day shall never dawn that shall see thee and me at strife. There is honourable peace between us, Dagny is dearer to me than weapons or gold, and never shall I forget that thou art her nearest kinsman.

ÖRNULF.

There I know thee again, brave Sigurd!

SIGURD.

But Gunnar is my foster-brother; we have sworn each other faith and friendship. Both in war and peace have

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we faced fortune together, and of all men he is dearest to me. Stout though he be, he loves not war;—but as for me, ye know, all of you, that I shrink not from strife; yet here I stand forth, Örnulf, and pray for peace on Gunnar's behalf. Let me have my will!

ÖRNULF.

I cannot; I should be a scoff to all brave men, were I to fare empty-handed back to Iceland.

SIGURD.

Thou shalt not fare empty-handed. Here in the cove my two long-ships are lying, with all the wealth I have won in my viking-ventures. There are many costly gifts from outland kings, good weapons by the chestful, and other priceless chattels. Take thou one of the ships; choose which thou wilt, and it shall be thine with all it contains—be that the atonement for Hiördis, and let Gunnar be at peace.

ÖRNULF.

Brave Sigurd, wilt thou do this for Gunnar?

SIGURD.

For a faithful friend, no man can do too much.

ÖRNULF.

Give half thy goods and gear!

SIGURD.

[*Urgently.*] Take the whole, take both my ships, take all that is mine, and let me fare with thee to Iceland

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as the poorest man in thy train. What I give, I can win once more; but if thou and Gunnar come to strife, I shall never see a glad day again. Now, Örnulf, thy answer?

ÖRNULF.

[*Reflecting.*] Two good long-ships, weapons, and other chattels—too much gear can no man have; but —— [*Vehemently.*] No, no! — Hiördis has threatened me; I will not! I were dishonoured should I take thy goods!

SIGURD.

Yet listen——

ÖRNULF.

No, I say! I must fight for my own right, be my fortune what it may.

KÅRE.

[*Approaching.*] Right friendly is Sigurd's rede, but if thou wilt indeed fight thine own battle with all thy might, I can counsel thee better. Dream not of atonement so long as Hiördis has aught to say; but revenge can be thine if thou wilt hearken to me.

ÖRNULF.

Revenge? What dost thou counsel?

SIGURD.

Evil, I can well see!

DAGNY.

[*To* ÖRNULF.] Oh, do not hear him!

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KÅRE.

Hiördis has declared me an outlaw; she will set snares for my life; do thou swear to see me scatheless, and this night will I burn Gunnar's hall and all within it. Is that to thy mind?

SIGURD.

Dastard!

ÖRNULF.

[*Quietly.*] To my mind? Knowest thou, Kåre, what were more to my mind? [*In a voice of thunder.*] To hew off thy nose and ears, thou vile thrall. Little dost thou know old Örnulf if thou thinkest to have his help in such a deed of shame!

KÅRE.

[*Who has shrunk backwards.*] If thou fall not upon Gunnar he will surely fall upon thee.

ÖRNULF.

Have I not weapons, and strength to wield them?

SIGURD.

[*To* KARE.] And now away with thee! Thy presence is a shame to honourable men!

KÅRE.

[*Going off.*] Well well, I must shift for myself as best I may. But this I tell you: if ye think to deal gently with Hiördis, ye will come to rue it. I know her—and I know where to strike her sorest!

[*Goes down towards the shore.*

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DAGNY.

He is hatching some revenge. Sigurd, it must be hindered!

ÖRNULF.

[*Angrily.*] Nay, let him do as he will; she is worth no better!

DAGNY.

That meanest thou not; bethink thee, she is thy foster-child.

ÖRNULF.

Woe worth the day when I took her under my roof! Jökul's words begin to come true.

SIGURD.

Jökul's?

ÖRNULF.

Ay, her father's. When I gave him his death-wound he fell back upon the sward, and fixed his eyes on me and sang:

> Jökul's kin for Jökul's slayer
> many a woe shall still be weaving;
> Jökul's hoard whoe'er shall harry
> thence shall harvest little gladness.

When he had sung that, he was silent awhile, and laughed; and thereupon he died.

SIGURD.

Why should'st thou heed his words?

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ÖRNULF.

Who knows? The story goes, and many believe it, that Jökul gave his children a wolf's heart to eat, that they might be fierce and fell; and Hiördis has surely had her share, that one can well see. [*Breaks off on looking out towards the right.*] Gunnar!—Do we two meet again!

GUNNAR.

[*Enters.*] Ay, Örnulf, think of me what thou wilt, but I cannot part from thee as thy foe.

ÖRNULF.

What is thy purpose?

GUNNAR.

To hold out the hand of peace to thee ere thou depart. Hear me all of you: go with me to my homestead, and be my guests as long as ye will. We lack not meat or drink or sleeping-room, and there shall be no talk of our quarrel either to-day or to-morrow.

SIGURD.

But Hiördis——?

GUNNAR.

Yields to my will; she changed her thought on the homeward way, and deemed, as I did, that we would soon be at one if ye would but be our guests.

DAGNY.

Yes, yes; let it be so.

SIGURD.

[*Doubtfully.*] But I know not if——

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DAGNY.

Gunnar is thy foster-brother; little I know thee if thou say him nay.

GUNNAR.

[*To* SIGURD.] Thou hast been my friend where'er we fared; thou wilt not thwart me now!

DAGNY.

And to depart from the land, leaving Hiördis with hate in her heart—no, no, that must we not!

GUNNAR.

I have done Örnulf a great wrong; until it is made good, I cannot be at peace with myself.

SIGURD.

[*Vehemently.*] All else will I do for thee, Gunnar, but not stay here! [*Mastering himself.*] I am King Æthelstan's sworn henchman, and I must be with him in England ere the winter is out.

DAGNY.

But that thou canst be, none the less!

GUNNAR.

No man can know what lot awaits him; mayhap this is our last meeting, Sigurd, and thou wilt repent that thou didst not stand by me to the end.

DAGNY.

And long will it be ere thou see me glad again, if thou set sail to-day.

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SIGURD.

[*Determined.*] Well, be it so! It shall be as ye will, although—— But no more of that; here is my hand; I will stay to feast with thee and Hiördis.

GUNNAR.

[*Shakes his hand.*] I knew it, Sigurd, and I thank thee.—And thou, Örnulf, say'st thou likewise?

ÖRNULF.

[*Gruffly.*] I shall think upon it. Bitterly has Hiördis galled me;—I will not answer to-day.

GUNNAR.

It is well, old warrior; Sigurd and Dagny will know how to smooth thy brow. Now must I prepare the feast; peace be with you the while, and well met in my hall. [*Goes out by the right.*

SIGURD.

[*To himself.*] Hiördis has changed her thought, said he? Little he knows her; I rather deem that she is plotting—— [*Interrupting himself and turning to his men.*] Come, follow me all to the ships; good gifts will I choose for Gunnar and his household.

DAGNY.

Gifts of the best we have. And thou, father—thou shalt have no peace for me until thou yield thee.

[*She goes with* SIGURD *and his men down towards the shore at the back.*

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ÖRNULF.

Yield me? Ay, if there were no women-folk in Gunnar's house, then—— Oh, if I but knew where to strike her!—Thorolf, thou here!

THOROLF.

[*Who has entered hastily.*] As thou seest. Is it true that thou hast met with Gunnar?

ÖRNULF.

Yes.

THOROLF.

And art at strife with him?

ÖRNULF.

H'm—with Hiördis, at least.

THOROLF.

Then be of good cheer; soon shalt thou be avenged!

ÖRNULF.

Avenged? Who shall avenge me?

THOROLF.

Listen: as I stood on board the ship, there came a man running, with a staff in his hand, and called to me: "If thou be of Örnulf's shipfolk, then greet him from Kåre the Peasant, and say that now will I avenge the twain of us." Thereupon he took a boat and rowed away, saying as he passed: "Twenty outlaws are at haven in the fiord; with them I fare southward, and ere eventide shall Hiördis be childless.

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ÖRNULF.

He said that! Ha, now I understand; Gunnar has sent his son away; Kåre is at feud with him——

THOROLF.

And now he is rowing southward to slay the boy!

ÖRNULF.

[*With sudden resolution.*] Up, all! That booty will we fight for!

THOROLF.

What wilt thou do?

ÖRNULF.

Leave that to me; it shall be I, and not Kåre, that will take revenge!

THOROLF.

I will go with thee!

ÖRNULF.

Nay, do thou follow with Sigurd and thy sister to Gunnar's hall.

THOROLF.

Sigurd? Is he in the isle?

ÖRNULF.

There may'st thou see his warships; we are at one—do thou go with him.

THOROLF.

Among thy foes?

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ÖRNULF.

Go thou to the feast. Now shall Hiördis learn to know old Örnulf! But hark thee, Thorolf, to no one must thou speak of what I purpose; dost hear? to no one!

THOROLF.

I promise.

ÖRNULF.

[*Takes his hand and looks at him affectionately.*] Farewell then, my fair boy; bear thee in courtly wise at the feast-house, that I may have honour of thee. Beware of idle babbling; but what thou sayest, let it be keen as a sword. Be friendly to those that deal with thee in friendly wise; but if thou be taunted, hold not thy peace. Drink not more than thou canst bear; but put not the horn aside when it is offered thee in measure, lest thou be deemed womanish.

THOROLF.

Nay, be at ease!

ÖRNULF.

Then away to the feast at Gunnar's hall. I too will come to the feast, and that in the guise they least think of. [*Blithely to the rest.*] Come, my wolf-cubs; be your fangs keen;—now shall ye have blood to drink.

[*He goes off with his elder sons to the right, at the back.*

SIGURD *and* DAGNY *come up from the ships, richly dressed for the banquet. They are followed by two men, carrying a chest, who lay it down and return as they came.*

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THOROLF.

[*Looking out after his father.*] Now fare they all forth to fight, and I must stay behind; it is hard to be the youngest of the house.—Dagny! all hail and greetings to thee, sister mine!

DAGNY.

Thorolf! All good powers!—thou art a man, grown!

THOROLF.

That may I well be, forsooth, in five years——

DAGNY.

Ay, true, true.

SIGURD.

[*Giving him his hand.*] In thee will Örnulf find a stout carl, or I mistake me.

THOROLF.

Would he but prove me——!

DAGNY.

[*Smiling.*] He spares thee more than thou hast a mind to? Thou wast ever well-nigh too dear to him.

SIGURD.

Whither has he gone?

THOROLF.

Down to his ship;—go you on; he will follow.

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SIGURD.

I await my men; they are mooring my ships and bringing ashore wares.

THOROLF.

There must I lend a hand!

[*Goes down towards the shore.*

SIGURD.

[*After a moment's reflection.*] Dagny, my wife, now that we are alone, I have that to tell thee which must no longer be hidden.

DAGNY.

[*Surprised.*] What meanest thou?

SIGURD.

There may be danger in this faring to Gunnar's hall.

DAGNY.

Danger? Thinkest thou that Gunnar——?

SIGURD.

Nay, Gunnar is brave and true—yet better had it been that I had sailed from the isle without crossing his threshold.

DAGNY.

Thou makest me fear! Sigurd, what is amiss?

SIGURD.

First answer me this: the golden ring that I gave thee, where hast thou it?

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DAGNY.

[*Showing it.*] Here, on my arm; thou badest me wear it.

SIGURD.

Cast it to the bottom of the sea, so deep that none may ever set eyes on it again; else may it be the bane of many men!

DAGNY.

The ring!

SIGURD.

[*In a low voice.*] That night when we bore away the twain of you—dost remember?

DAGNY.

Do I remember!

SIGURD.

It is of that I would speak.

DAGNY.

[*In suspense.*] What is it? Say on!

SIGURD.

Thou knowest there had been a feast; thou didst seek thy chamber betimes; but Hiördis still sat among the men in the feast-hall. The horn went busily round, and many a great vow was sworn. I swore to bear away a fair maid with me from Iceland; Gunnar swore the same as I, and passed the cup to Hiördis. She grasped it and stood up, and vowed this vow, that no warrior should

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have her to wife, save him who should go to her bower, slay the white bear that stood bound at the door, and carry her away in his arms.

DAGNY.

Yes, yes; all this I know!

SIGURD.

All men deemed that it might not be, for the bear was the fiercest of beasts; none but Hiördis might come near it, and it had the strength of twenty men.

DAGNY.

But Gunnar slew it, and by that deed won fame throughout all lands.

SIGURD.

[*In a low voice.*] He won the fame—but—I did the deed!

DAGNY.

[*With a cry.*] Thou!

SIGURD.

When the men left the feast-hall, Gunnar prayed me to come with him alone to our sleeping-place. Then said he: "Hiördis is dearer to me than all women; without her I cannot live." I answered him: "Then go to her bower; thou knowest the vow she hath sworn." But he said: "Life is dear to him that loves; if I should assail the bear, the end were doubtful, and I am loath to lose my life, for then should I lose Hiördis too." Long

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did we talk, and the end was that Gunnar made ready his ship, while I drew my sword, took Gunnar's harness upon me, and went to the bower.

DAGNY.

[*With pride and joy.*] And thou—thou didst slay the bear!

SIGURD.

I slew him. In the bower it was dark as under a raven's wing; Hiördis deemed it was Gunnar that sat by her—she was heated with the mead—she drew a ring from her arm and gave it to me—it is that thou wearest now.

DAGNY.

[*Hesitating.*] And thou wast alone that night with Hiördis in her bower?

SIGURD.

My sword lay drawn between us. [*A short pause.*] Ere the dawn, I bore Hiördis to Gunnar's ship; she dreamed not of our guile, and he sailed away with her. Then went I to thy sleeping-place and found thee there among thy women;—what followed, thou knowest; I sailed from Iceland with a fair maid, as I had sworn, and from that day hast thou stood faithfully at my side whithersoever I have wandered.

DAGNY.

[*Much moved.*] My brave husband! And that great deed was thine!—Oh, I should have known it; it could have been none else! Hiördis, that proud and stately

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woman, couldst thou have won, yet didst choose me! Now wouldst thou be tenfold dearer to me, wert thou not already dearer than all the world.

SIGURD.

Dagny, my sweet wife, now thou knowest all—that need be known. I could not but warn thee; for that ring—Hiördis must never see it! Wouldst thou do my will, then cast it from thee—into the depths of the sea.

DAGNY.

Nay, Sigurd, it is too dear to me; is it not thy gift? But be at ease, I will hide it from every eye, and never shall I breathe a word of what thou hast told me.

THOROLF *comes up from the ships, with* SIGURD'S *men.*

THOROLF.

All is ready for the feast.

DAGNY.

Come then, Sigurd—my brave, my noble warrior!

SIGURD.

Beware, Dagny—beware! With t h e e it rests now whether this meeting shall end in peace or in blood. [*Cheerfully to the others.*] Away then, to the feast in Gunnar's hall!

[*Goes out with* DAGNY *to the right; the others follow.*

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ACT SECOND.

The feast-room in GUNNAR'S *house. The entrance-door is in the back; smaller doors in the side-walls. In front, on the left, the greater high-seat; opposite it, on the right, the lesser. In the middle of the floor, a wood fire is burning on a built-up hearth. In the background, on both sides of the door, are daïses for the women of the household. From each of the high-seats, a long table, with benches, stretches backwards, parallel with the wall. It is dark outside; the fire lights the room.*

HIÖRDIS *and* DAGNY *enter from the right.*

DAGNY.

Nay, Hiördis, it passes my wit to understand thee. Thou hast shown me all the house; I know not what thing thou lackest, and all thou hast is fair and goodly; —then why bemoan thy lot?

HIÖRDIS.

Cage an eagle and it will bite at the wires, be they of iron or of gold.

DAGNY.

In one thing at least thou art richer than I; thou hast Egil, thy little son.

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HIÖRDIS.

Better no child, than one born in shame.

DAGNY.

In shame?

HIÖRDIS.

Dost thou forget thy father's saying? Egil is the son of a leman; that was his word.

DAGNY.

A word spoken in wrath—why wilt thou heed it?

HIÖRDIS.

Nay, nay, ÖRNULF was right; Egil is weak; one can see he is no freeborn child.

DAGNY.

Hiördis, how canst thou——?

HIÖRDIS.

[*Unheeding.*] Doubt not that shame can be sucked into the blood, like the venom of a snake-bite. Of another mettle are the freeborn sons of mighty men. I have heard of a queen that took her son and sewed his kirtle fast to his flesh, yet he never blinked an eye. [*With an evil look.*] Dagny, that will I try with Egil!

DAGNY.

[*Horrified.*] Hiördis, Hiördis!

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Laughing.*] Ha-ha-ha! Dost thou think I meant my words? [*Changing her tone.*] But, believe me or not as thou wilt, there are times when such deeds seem to lure me. Doubtless it is in my blood—for I am of the race of the Jötuns,[1] they say.—Come, sit thou here, Dagny. Far hast thou wandered in these five long years; tell me, thou hast ofttimes been a guest in the halls of kings?

DAGNY.

Many a time—and chiefly with Æthelstan of England.

HIÖRDIS.

And everywhere thou hast been held in honour, and hast sat in the highest seats at the board?

DAGNY.

Doubtless. As Sigurd's wife——

HIÖRDIS.

Ay, ay—a famous man is Sigurd—though Gunnar stands above him.

DAGNY.

Gunnar?

HIÖRDIS.

One deed did Gunnar do that Sigurd shrank from. But let that be! Tell me, when Sigurd went a-viking and thou with him, when thou didst hear the sword-blades sing in the fierce war-game, when the blood

[1] The giants or Titans of Scandinavian mythology.

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streamed red on the deck—came there not over thee an untameable longing to plunge into the strife? Didst thou not don harness and take up arms?

DAGNY.

Never! How canst thou think it? I, a woman!

HIÖRDIS.

A woman, a woman,—who knows what a woman may do!—But one thing thou canst tell me, Dagny, for that thou surely knowest: when a man clasps to his breast the woman he loves—is it true that her blood burns, that her bosom throbs—that she swoons in a strange ecstasy?

DAGNY.

[*Blushing.*] Hiördis, how canst thou——!

HIÖRDIS.

Come, tell me——!

DAGNY.

Surely thou thyself hast known it.

HIÖRDIS.

Ay once, and only once; it was that night when Gunnar sat with me in my bower; he crushed me in his arms till my byrnie[1] burst, and then, then——!

DAGNY.

[*Exclaiming.*] What! Sigurd——!

[1] Breastplate.

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HIÖRDIS.

Sigurd? What of Sigurd? I spoke of Gunnar—that night when he bore me away——

DAGNY.

[*Collecting herself.*] Yes, yes, I remember.—I know well——

HIÖRDIS.

That was the only time; never, never again! I deemed I was bewitched; for that Gunnar could so clasp a woman—— [*Stops and looks at* DAGNY.] What ails thee? Methinks thou turnest pale and red!

DAGNY.

Nay, nay!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Without heeding her.*] Aye, the merry viking-raid should have been my lot; it had been better for me, and —mayhap for all of us. That were life, full and rich life! Dost thou not wonder, Dagny, to find me here alive? Art not afraid to be alone with me in the hall, thus in the dark? Deem'st thou not that I must have died in all these years, and that it is my ghost that stands at thy side?

DAGNY.

[*Painfully ill at ease.*] Come—let us go—to the others.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Seizing her by the arm.*] No, stay! Seems it not strange to thee, Dagny, that any woman can yet live who has spent here five such nights?

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DAGNY.

Five nights?

HIÖRDIS.

Here in the north each night is a whole winter long. [*Quickly and with an altered expression.*] Yet the place is fair enough, doubt it not! Thou shalt see sights here such as thou hast not seen in the halls of the English king. We shall be together as sisters whilst thou bidest with me; we shall go down to the sea when the storm blows up afresh; thou shalt see the billows racing to the land like wild, white-maned horses. And then the whales far out in the offing! They dash one against another like steel-clad warriors! Ha, what joy to be a witch-wife and ride on a whale's back—to speed before the bark, and wake the storm, and lure men to the deeps with lovely songs of sorcery!

DAGNY.

Fie, Hiördis, how canst thou speak such things!

HIÖRDIS.

Canst t h o u sing sorceries, Dagny?

DAGNY.

[*With horror.*] I!

HIÖRDIS.

I trow thou canst; how else didst thou lure Sigurd to thee?

DAGNY.

Thy speech is shameful; let me go!

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Holding her back.*] Because I jest! Nay, hear me to the end! Think, Dagny, what it is to sit by the window in the eventide and hear the kelpie[1] wailing in the boat-house; to sit waiting and listening for the dead men's ride to Valhal; for their way lies past us here in the north. They are the brave men that fell in fight, the strong women that did not drag out their lives tamely, like thee and me; they sweep through the air in cloud-rack and storm, on their black horses, with jangling bells! [*Embraces* DAGNY, *and presses her wildly in her arms.*] Ha, Dagny! think of riding the last ride on so rare a steed!

DAGNY.

[*Struggling to escape.*] Hiördis, Hiördis! Let me go! I will not hear thee!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Laughing.*] Weak art thou of heart, and easily affrighted.

GUNNAR *enters from the back, with* SIGURD *and* THOROLF.

GUNNAR.

Now, truly, are all things to my very mind! I have found thee again, Sigurd, my brave brother, as kind and true as of old. I have Örnulf's son under my roof, and the old man himself follows speedily after; is it not so?

THOROLF.

So he promised.

[1] "Draugen," a vague and horrible sea-monster.

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GUNNAR.

Then all I lack is that Egil should be here.

THOROLF.

'Tis plain thou lovest the boy, thou namest him so oft.

GUNNAR.

Truly I love him; he is my only child; and he is like to grow up fair and kindly.

HIÖRDIS.

But no warrior.

GUNNAR.

Nay—that thou must not say.

SIGURD.

How couldst thou send him from thee——

GUNNAR.

Would that I had not! [*In an undertone.*] But thou knowest, Sigurd, he who loves overmuch, takes not always the manliest part. [*Aloud.*] I had few men in my house, and none could be sure of his life when it was known that Örnulf lay in the cove with a ship of war.

HIÖRDIS.

One thing I know that ought first to be made safe, life afterwards.

THOROLF.

And that is——?

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HIÖRDIS.

Honour and fame among men.

GUNNAR.

Hiördis!

SIGURD.

It shall not be said of Gunnar that he has tainted his honour by doing this.

GUNNAR.

[*Sternly.*] No one shall make strife between me and Örnulf's kinsfolk!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Smiling.*] Tell me, Sigurd—can thy ship sail with any wind?

SIGURD.

Ay, when 'tis cunningly steered.

HIÖRDIS.

Good! I too will steer my ship cunningly, and make my way whither I will. [*Retires towards the back.*

DAGNY.

[*Whispers, uneasily.*] Sigurd, let us hence—this very night!

SIGURD.

It is too late now; 'twas thou that——

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DAGNY.

Then I held Hiördis dear; but now——; I have heard her speak words I shudder to think of.

SIGURD'S *men, with other guests, men and women, house-carls and handmaidens, enter from the back.*

GUNNAR.

[*After a short pause, in which greetings and the like are exchanged.*] Now to the board! My chief guest, Örnulf of the Fiords, comes later; so Thorolf promises.

HIÖRDIS.

[*To the house-folk.*] Pass the ale and mead around, that hearts may wax merry and tongues may be loosed.

[GUNNAR *leads* SIGURD *to the high-seat on the right.* DAGNY *seats herself on* SIGURD'S *right,* HIÖRDIS *opposite him, at the other side of the same table.* THOROLF *is in like manner ushered to a place at the other table, and thus sits opposite* GUNNAR, *who occupies the greater high-seat. The others take their seats further back.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*After a pause in which they drink with each other and converse quietly across the tables.*] It seldom chances that so many brave men are seated together, as I see to-night in our hall. It were fitting, then, that we should essay the old pastime: Let each man name the chief of his deeds, that all may judge which is the mightiest.

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GUNNAR.

That is an ill custom at a drinking-feast; 'twill oft breed strife.

HIÖRDIS.

Little did I deem that Gunnar was afraid.

SIGURD.

That no one deems; but it were long ere we came to an end, were we all to tell of our deeds, so many as we be. Do thou rather tell us, Gunnar, of thy journey to Biarmeland; 'tis no small exploit to fare so far to the north, and gladly would we hear of it.

HIÖRDIS.

The journey to Biarmeland is chapman's work, and little worthy to be named among warriors. Nay, do thou begin, Sigurd, if thou wouldst not have me deem that thou canst ill endure to hear my husband's praise! Say on; name that one of thy deeds which thou dost prize the highest.

SIGURD.

Well, since thou wilt have it so, so must it be. Let it be told, then, that I lay a-viking among the Orkneys; there came foemen against us, but we swept them from their ships, and I fought alone against eight men.

HIÖRDIS.

Good was that deed; but wert thou fully armed?

SIGURD.

Fully armed, with axe, spear, and sword.

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HIÖRDIS.

Still the deed was good. Now must thou, my husband, name that which thou deemest the chief among thy exploits.

GUNNAR.

[*Unwillingly.*] I slew two berserkers who had seized a merchant-ship; and thereupon I sent the captive chapmen home, giving them their ship freely, without ransom. The King of England deemed well of that deed; he said that I had done honourably, and gave me thanks and good gifts.

HIÖRDIS.

Nay, truly, Gunnar, a better deed than that couldst thou name.

GUNNAR.

[*Vehemently.*] I will take praise for no other deed! Since last I fared from Iceland I have lived at peace and traded in merchandise. No word more on this matter!

HIÖRDIS.

If thou thyself wilt hide thy renown, thy wife shall speak.

GUNNAR.

Peace, Hiördis—I command thee!

HIÖRDIS.

Sigurd fought with eight men, being fully armed; Gunnar came to my bower in the black night, slew the

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bear that had twenty men's strength, and yet had but a short sword in his hand.

GUNNAR.

[*Violently agitated.*] Woman, not a word more!

DAGNY.

[*Softly.*] Sigurd, wilt thou endure——?

SIGURD.

[*Likewise.*] Be still!

HIÖRDIS.

[*To the company.*] And now, ye brave men—which is the mightier, Sigurd or Gunnar?

GUNNAR.

Silence!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Loudly.*] Speak out; I have the right to crave judgment.

AN OLD MAN.

[*Among the guests.*] If the truth be told, then is Gunnar's deed greater than all other deeds of men; Gunnar is the mightiest warrior, and Sigurd is second to him.

GUNNAR.

[*With a glance across the table.*] Ah, Sigurd, Sigurd, didst thou but know——!

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DAGNY.

[*Softly.*] It is too much—friend though he be!

SIGURD.

Peace, wife! [*Aloud, to the others.*] Ay, truly, Gunnar is the most honourable of all men; so would I esteem him to my dying day, even had he never done that deed; for that I hold more lightly than ye.

HIÖRDIS.

There speaks thy envy, Sigurd Viking!

SIGURD.

[*Smiling.*] Mightily dost thou mistake. [*Kindly, to* GUNNAR, *drinking to him across the table.*] Hail, noble Gunnar; our friendship shall stand fast, whosoever may seek to break it.

HIÖRDIS.

No one, that I wot of, has such a thought.

SIGURD.

Say not so; I could almost think thou hadst bidden us to the feast in the hope to stir up strife.

HIÖRDIS.

That is like thee, Sigurd; now art thou wroth that thou may'st not be held the mightiest man at the board!

SIGURD.

I have ever esteemed Gunnar more highly than myself.

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HIÖRDIS.

Well, well—second to Gunnar is still a good place, and ——[*with a side glance at* THOROLF] had Örnulf been here, he could have had the third seat.

THOROLF.

Then would Jökul, thy father, find a low place indeed; for he fell before Örnulf.

[*The following dispute is carried on, by both parties, with rising and yet repressed irritation.*

HIÖRDIS.

That shalt thou never say! Örnulf is a skald, and men whisper that he has praised himself for greater deeds than he has done.

THOROLF.

Then woe to him who whispers so loudly that it comes to my ear!

HIÖRDIS.

[*With a smile of provocation.*] Wouldst thou avenge it?

THOROLF.

Ay, so that my vengeance should be told of far and wide.

HIÖRDIS.

Then here I pledge a cup to this, that thou may'st first have a beard on thy chin.

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THOROLF.

Even a beardless lad is too good to wrangle with women.

HIÖRDIS.

But too weak to fight with men; therefore thy father let thee lie by the hearth at home in Iceland, whilst thy brothers went a-viking.

THOROLF.

It had been well had he kept as good an eye on thee; for then hadst thou not left the land an unwedded woman.

GUNNAR AND SIGURD.

Thorolf!

DAGNY.

[*Simultaneously.*] Brother!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Softly, and quivering with rage.*] Ha! wait—wait!

THOROLF.

[*Gives* GUNNAR *his hand.*] Be not wroth, Gunnar;—evil words came to my tongue; but thy wife goaded me!

DAGNY.

[*Softly and imploringly.*] Foster-sister, by any love thou hast ever borne me, stir not up strife!

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Laughing.*] Jests must pass at the feast-board, if the merriment is to thrive.

GUNNAR.

[*Who has been talking softly to* THOROLF.] Thou art a brave lad! [*Hands him a sword which hangs beside the high-seat.*] Here, Thorolf, here is a good gift for thee. Wield it well, and let us be friends.

HIÖRDIS.

Beware how thou givest away thy weapons, Gunnar; men may say thou dost part with things thou canst not use!

THOROLF.

[*Who has meanwhile examined the sword.*] Thanks for the gift, Gunnar; it shall never be drawn in an unworthy cause.

HIÖRDIS.

If thou wilt keep that promise, then do thou never lend the sword to thy brothers.

GUNNAR.

Hiördis!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Continuing.*] Neither let it hang on thy father's wall; for there it would hang with base men's weapons.

THOROLF.

True enough, Hiördis—for there thy father's axe and shield have hung this many a year.

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Mastering herself.*] That Örnulf slew my father—that deed is ever on thy tongue; but if report speak true, 'twas scarce so honourable a deed as thou deemest.

THOROLF.

Of what report dost thou speak?

HIÖRDIS.

[*Smiling.*] I dare not name it, for it would make thee wroth.

THOROLF.

Then hold thy peace—I ask no better.

[*Turns from her.*

HIÖRDIS.

Nay, why should I not tell it? Is it true, Thorolf, that for three nights thy father sat in woman's weed, doing sorceries with the witch of Smalserhorn, ere he dared face Jökul in fight?

[*All rise; violent excitement among the guests.*

GUNNAR, SIGURD, AND DAGNY.

Hiördis!

THOROLF.

[*Bitterly exasperated.*] So base a lie has no man spoken of Örnulf of the Fiords! Thou thyself hast made it, for no one less venomous than thou could dream of such a thing. The blackest crime a man can do hast thou laid at my father's door. [*Throwing the sword away.*] There, Gunnar, take thy gift again; I can take nought from that house wherein my father is reviled.

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GUNNAR.

Thorolf, hear me——!

THOROLF.

Let me go! But beware both thou and Hiördis; for my father has now in his power one whom ye hold dearest of all!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Starting.*] Thy father has——!

GUNNAR.

[*With a cry.*] What sayest thou?

SIGURD.

[*Vehemently.*] Where is Örnulf?

THOROLF.

[*With mocking laughter.*] Gone southward—with my brothers.

GUNNAR.

Southward!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Shrieking.*] Gunnar! Örnulf has slain Egil, our son.

GUNNAR.

Slain!—Egil slain! Then woe to Örnulf and all his race! Thorolf, speak out;—is this true?

SIGURD.

Gunnar, Gunnar—hear me!

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GUNNAR.

Speak out, if thou care for thy life!

THOROLF.

Thou canst not fright me! Wait till my father comes; he shall plant a mark of shame over against Gunnar's house! And meanwhile, Hiördis, do thou cheer thee with these words I heard to-day: "Ere eventide shall Gunnar and his wife be childless."

[*Goes out by the back.*

GUNNAR.

[*In agony.*] Slain—slain! My little Egil slain!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Wildly.*] And thou—dost thou let him go? Let Egil, thy child, lie unavenged! Then wert thou the dastard of dastards——!

GUNNAR.

[*As if beside himself.*] A sword—an axe! 'Tis the last tidings he shall ever bring!

[*Seizes an axe from one of the bystanders and rushes out.*

SIGURD.

[*About to follow.*] Gunnar, hold thy hand!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Holding him back.*] Stay, stay! The men will part them; I know Gunnar!

[*A cry from the crowd, which has flocked together at the main door.*

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SIGURD AND DAGNY.

What is it?

A VOICE AMONG THE CROWD.

Thorolf has fallen.

SIGURD.

Thorolf! Ha, let me go!

DAGNY.

My brother! Oh, my brother!

[SIGURD *is on the point of rushing out. At the same moment, the crowd parts,* GUNNAR *enters, and throws down the axe at the door.*

GUNNAR.

Now it is done. Egil is avenged!

SIGURD.

Well for thee if thy hand has not been too hasty.

GUNNAR.

Mayhap, mayhap; but Egil, Egil, my fair boy!

HIÖRDIS.

Now must we arm us, and seek help among our friends; for Thorolf has many avengers.

GUNNAR.

[*Gloomily.*] He will be his own worst avenger; he will be with me night and day.

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HIÖRDIS.

Thorolf got his reward. Kinsmen must suffer for kinsmen's deeds.

GUNNAR.

True, true; but this I know, my mind was lighter ere this befell.

HIÖRDIS.

The first night[1] is ever the worst;—when that is over, thou wilt heed it no more. Örnulf has sought his revenge by shameful guile; he would not come against us in open strife; he feigned to be peacefully minded; and then he falls upon our defenceless child! Ha, I saw more clearly than ye; well I deemed that Örnulf was evil-minded and false; good cause had I to egg thee on against him and all his faithless tribe.

GUNNAR.

[*Fiercely.*] That hadst thou! My vengeance is poor beside Örnulf's crime. He has lost Thorolf, but he has six sons left—and I have none—none!

A HOUSE-CARL.

[*Enters hastily from the back.*] Örnulf of the Fiords is at hand!

GUNNAR.

Örnulf!

HIÖRDIS AND SEVERAL MEN.

To arms! to arms!

[1] Literally the "blood-night."

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DAGNY.

[*Simultaneously.*] My father!

SIGURD.

[*As if seized by a foreboding.*] Örnulf——! Ah, Gunnar, Gunnar!

GUNNAR.

[*Draws his sword.*] Up, all my men! Vengeance for Egil's death!

ÖRNULF *enters, with* EGIL *in his arms.*

GUNNAR.

[*With a shriek.*] Egil!

ÖRNULF.

I bring you back little Egil.

ALL.

[*One to another.*] Egil! Egil alive!

GUNNAR.

[*Letting his sword fall.*] Woe is me: what have I done?

DAGNY.

Oh, Thorolf, my brother!

SIGURD.

I knew it! I knew it!

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ÖRNULF.

[*Setting* EGIL *down.*] There, Gunnar, hast thou thy pretty boy again.

EGIL.

Father! Old Örnulf would not do me ill, as thou saidst when I went away.

ÖRNULF.

[*To* HIÖRDIS.] Now have I atoned for thy father; now surely there may be peace between us.

HIÖRDIS.

[*With repressed emotion.*] Mayhap!

GUNNAR.

[*As if waking up.*] Is it a hideous dream that maddens me! Thou—thou bringest Egil home!

ÖRNULF.

As thou seest; but in truth he has been near his death.

GUNNAR.

That I know.

ÖRNULF.

And hast no more joy in his return?

GUNNAR.

Had he come sooner, I had been more glad. But tell me all that has befallen!

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ÖRNULF.

That is soon done. Kåre the Peasant was plotting evil against you; with other caitiffs he fared southward after Egil.

GUNNAR.

Kåre! [*To himself.*] Ha, now I understand Thorolf's words!

ÖRNULF.

His purpose came to my ears; I needs must thwart so black a deed. I would not give atonement for Jökul, and, had things so befallen, I had willingly slain thee, Gunnar, in single combat—yet I could not but save thy child. With my sons, I hasted after Kåre.

SIGURD.

[*Softly.*] An accursed deed has here been done.

ÖRNULF.

When I came up with him, Egil's guards lay bound; thy son was already in thy foemen's hands, and they would not long have spared him. Hot was the fight! Seldom have I given and taken keener strokes; Kåre and two men fled inland; the rest sleep safely, and will be hard to waken.

GUNNAR.

[*In eager suspense.*] But thou—thou, Örnulf——?

ÖRNULF.

[*Darkly.*] Six sons followed me into the fight.

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GUNNAR.

[*Breathlessly.*] But homewards——?

ÖRNULF.

None.

GUNNAR.

[*Appalled.*] None! [*Softly.*] And Thorolf, Thorolf!

[*Deep emotion among the bystanders.* HIÖRDIS *shows signs of a violent mental struggle;* DAGNY *weeps silently by the high-seat on the right.* SIGURD *stands beside her, painfully agitated.*

ÖRNULF.

[*After a short pause.*] It is hard for a many-branching pine to be stripped in a single storm. But men die and men live;—hand me a horn; I will drink to my sons' memory. [*One of* SIGURD'S *men gives him a horn.*] Hail to you where now ye ride, my bold sons! Close upon your heels shall the bronze-gates not clang, for ye come to the hall with a great following. [*Drinks, and hands back the horn.*] And now home to Iceland! Örnulf has fought his last fight; the old tree has but one green branch left, and it must be shielded warily. Where is Thorolf?

EGIL.

[*To his father.*] Ay, let me see Thorolf! Örnulf says he will carve me a ship with many, many warriors aboard.

ÖRNULF.

I praise all good wights that Thorolf came not with us; for if he too—nay, strong though I be, t h a t had been

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too heavy for me to bear. But why comes he not? He was ever the first to meet his father; for to both of us it seemed we could not live apart a single day.

GUNNAR.

Örnulf, Örnulf!

ÖRNULF.

[*With growing uneasiness.*] Ye stand all silent, I mark it now. What ails you? Where is Thorolf?

DAGNY.

Sigurd, Sigurd—this will be the sorest blow to him!

GUNNAR.

[*Struggling with himself.*] Old man!—No——and yet, it cannot be hid——

ÖRNULF.

[*Vehemently.*] My son! Where is he?

GUNNAR.

Thorolf is slain!

ÖRNULF.

Slain! Thorolf? Thorolf? Ha, thou liest!

GUNNAR.

I would give my warmest heart-blood to know him alive!

HIÖRDIS.

[*To* ÖRNULF.] Thorolf was himself to blame for what befell; with dark sayings he gave us to wit that thou hadst fallen upon Egil and slain him;—we had parted half

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in wrath, and thou hast ere now brought death among my kindred. And moreover—Thorolf bore himself at the feast like a wanton boy; he brooked not our jesting, and spoke many evil things. Not till then did Gunnar wax wroth; not till then did he raise his hand upon thy son; and well I wot that he had good and lawful ground for that deed.

ÖRNULF.

[*Calmly.*] Well may we see that thou art a woman, for thou usest many words. To what end? If Thorold is slain, then is his saga over.

EGIL.

If Thorold is slain, I shall have no warriors.

ÖRNULF.

Nay, Egil—we have lost our warriors now, both thou and I. [*To* HIÖRDIS.] Thy father sang:

Jökul's kin for Jökul's slayer
many a woe shall still be weaving.

Well hast thou wrought that his words should come true. [*Pauses a moment, then turns to one of the men.*] Where got he his death-wound?

THE MAN.

Right across his brow.

ÖRNULF.

[*Pleased.*] Ha; that is an honourable wound; he did not turn his back. But fell he sideways, or in toward Gunnar's feet?

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THE MAN.

Half sideways and half toward Gunnar.

ÖRNULF.

That bodes but half vengeance; well well,—we shall see!

GUNNAR.

[*Approaching.*] Örnulf, I know well that all my goods were naught against thy loss; but crave of me what thou wilt——

ÖRNULF.

[*Sternly interrupting him.*] Give me Thorolf's body, and let me go! Where lies he?

[GUNNAR *points silently to the back.*

ÖRNULF.

[*Takes a step or two, but turns and says in a voice of thunder to* SIGURD, DAGNY, *and others who are making as though to follow him, sorrowing.*] Stay! Think ye Örnulf will be followed by a train of mourners, like a whimpering woman? Stay, I say!—I can bear my Thorolf alone. [*With calm strength.*] Sonless I go; but none shall say that he saw me bowed.

[*He goes slowly out.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*With forced laughter.*] Ay, let him go as he will; we shall scarce need many men to face him should he come with strife again! Now, Dagny—I wot it is the last time thy father shall sail from Iceland on such a quest!

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Scene from "The Vikings at Helgeland," Act II, as played at Fahlstrom's Theatre, Christiania, 1907

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SIGURD.

[*Indignant.*] Oh, shame!

DAGNY.

[*Likewise.*] And thou canst mock him—mock him, after all that has befallen?

HIÖRDIS.

A deed once done, 'tis wise to praise it. This morning I swore hate and vengeance against Örnulf;—the slaying of Jökul I might have forgotten—all, save that he cast shame upon my lot. He called me a leman; if it be so, it shames me not; for Gunnar is mightier now than thy father; he is greater and more famous than Sigurd, thine own husband!

DAGNY.

[*In wild indignation.*] There thou errest, Hiördis—and even now shall all men know that thou dwellest under a coward's roof!

SIGURD.

[*Vehemently.*] Dagny, beware!

GUNNAR.

A coward!

HIÖRDIS.

[*With scornful laughter.*] Thou pratest senselessly.

DAGNY.

It shall no longer be hidden; I held my peace till thou didst mock at my father and my dead brothers; I held my peace while Örnulf was here, lest he should learn that

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Thorolf fell by a dastard's hand. But now—praise Gunnar nevermore for that deed in Iceland; for Gunnar is a coward! The sword that lay drawn between thee and the bear-slayer hangs at my husband's side—the ring thou didst take from thy arm thou gavest to Sigurd. [*Takes it off and holds it aloft.*] Behold it!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Wildly.*] Sigurd.

THE CROWD.

Sigurd! Sigurd did the deed!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Quivering with agitation.*] He! he!—Gunnar, is this true?

GUNNAR.

[*With lofty calm.*] It is all true, save only that I am a coward; no coward or dastard am I.

SIGURD.

[*Moved.*] That art thou not, Gunnar! That hast thou never been! [*To the rest.*] Away, my men! Away from here!

DAGNY.

[*At the door, to* HIÖRDIS.] Who is now the mightiest man at the board—my husband, or thine?

[*She goes out with* SIGURD *and his men.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*To herself.*] Now have I but one thing left to do—but one deed to think upon: Sigurd or I must die!

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ACT THIRD.

The hall in GUNNAR'S *house. It is day.*

HIÖRDIS *sits on the bench in front of the smaller high-seat, busy twisting a bow-string; on the table lie a bow and some arrows.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*Pulling at the bow-string.*] It is tough and strong; [*With a glance at the arrows*] the shaft is both keen and well-weighted—[*Lets her hands fall in her lap*] but where is the hand that——. [*Vehemently.*] Flouted, flouted by him — by Sigurd! I must hate him more than others, that can I well mark; but many days shall not pass ere I have—— [*Meditating.*] Ay, but the arm, the arm that shall do the deed——?

GUNNAR *enters, silent and thoughtful, from the back.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*After a short pause.*] How goes it with thee, my husband?

GUNNAR.

Ill, Hiördis; I cannot away with that deed of yesterday; it lies heavy on my heart.

HIÖRDIS.

Do as I do; get thee some work to busy thee.

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GUNNAR.

Doubtless I must.

[*A pause;* GUNNAR *paces up and down the hall, notices what* HIÖRDIS *is doing, and approaches her.*

GUNNAR.

What dost thou there?

HIÖRDIS.

[*Without looking up.*] I am twisting a bow-string; canst thou not see?

GUNNAR.

A bow-string—of thine own hair?

HIÖRDIS.

[*Smiling.*] Great deeds are born with every hour in these times; yesterday thou didst slay my foster-brother, and I have woven this since daybreak.

GUNNAR.

Hiördis, Hiördis!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Looking up.*] What is amiss?

GUNNAR.

Where wast thou last night?

HIÖRDIS.

Last night?

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GUNNAR.

Thou wast not in the sleeping-room.

HIÖRDIS.

Know'st thou that?

GUNNAR.

I could not sleep; I tossed in restless dreams of that—that which befell Thorolf. I dreamt that he came—— No matter; I wakened. Then methought there sounded a strange, fair song through all the house; I arose; I pushed the door ajar; here I saw thee sitting by the log-fire—it burned blue and red—fixing arrow-heads, and singing sorceries over them.

HIÖRDIS.

I did what was needful; for strong is the breast that must be pierced this day.

GUNNAR.

I understand thee well: thou wouldst have Sigurd slain.

HIÖRDIS.

Mayhap.

GUNNAR.

Thou shalt never have thy will. I will keep peace with Sigurd, howe'er thou goad me.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Smiling.*] Dost think so?

GUNNAR.

I know it!

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Hands him the bow-string.*] Tell me, Gunnar—canst loose this knot?

GUNNAR.

[*Tries it.*] Nay, it is too cunningly and firmly woven.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Rising.*] The Norns[1] weave yet more cunningly; their web is still harder to unravel.

GUNNAR.

Dark are the ways of the Mighty Ones;—what know we of them, thou or I?

HIÖRDIS.

Yet one thing I know surely: that to both of us must Sigurd's life be baleful.

[*A pause;* GUNNAR *stands lost in thought.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*Who has been silently watching him.*] Of what thinkest thou?

GUNNAR.

Of a dream I had of late. Methought I had done the deed thou cravest; Sigurd lay slain on the earth; thou didst stand beside him, and thy face was wondrous pale. Then said I: "Art thou glad, now that I have done thy will?" But thou didst laugh and answer: "Blither should I be didst thou, Gunnar, lie there in Sigurd's stead."

[1] The "Nornir" were the Fates of northern mythology.

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HIÖRDIS.

[*With forced laughter.*] Ill must thou know me if such a senseless dream can stay thy hand.

GUNNAR.

Tell me, Hiördis, what thinkest thou of this hall?

HIÖRDIS.

To speak truly, Gunnar, sometimes it seems to me too strait and narrow.

GUNNAR.

Ay, ay, so I have thought; we are one too many.

HIÖRDIS.

Two, mayhap.

GUNNAR.

[*Who has not heard her last words.*] But that shall be set right.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Looks at him interrogatively.*] Set right? Then thou art minded to——?

GUNNAR.

To fit out my warships and put to sea; I will win back the honour I have lost because thou wast dearer to me than all beside.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Thoughtfully.*] Thou wilt put to sea? Ay, so it may be best for us both.

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GUNNAR.

Even from the day we sailed from Iceland, I saw that it would go ill with us. Thy soul is strong and proud; there are times when I well-nigh fear thee; yet, it is strange —chiefly for that do I hold thee so dear. Dread goes forth from thee like a spell; methinks thou couldst lure me to the blackest deeds, and all would seem good to me that thou didst crave. [*Shaking his head reflectively.*] Unfathomable is the Norn's rede; Sigurd should have been thy husband.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Vehemently.*] Sigurd!

GUNNAR.

Yes, Sigurd. Vengeance and hatred blind thee, else wouldst thou prize him better. Had I been like Sigurd, I could have made life glad for thee.

HIÖRDIS.

[*With strong but suppressed emotion.*] That—that deemest thou Sigurd could have done?

GUNNAR.

He is strong of soul, and proud as thou to boot.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Violently.*] If that be so—[*Collecting herself.*] No matter, no matter! [*With a wild outburst.*] Gunnar, take Sigurd's life!

GUNNAR.

Never!

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HIÖRDIS.

By fraud and falsehood thou mad'st me thy wife—that shall be forgotten! Five joyless years have I spent in this house—all shall be forgotten from the day when Sigurd lives no more!

GUNNAR.

No harm shall e'er befall him from my hand. [*Shrinks back involuntarily.*] Hiördis, Hiördis, tempt me not!

HIÖRDIS.

Then must I find another avenger; not long shall Sigurd mock at me and thee! [*Clenching her hands in convulsive rage.*] With her — that simpleton—with her mayhap he is even now sitting alone, dallying, and making sport of us; speaking of the bitter wrong that was done me when in thy stead he bore me away; telling how he laughed over his guile as he stood in the mirk of my bower, and I knew him not!

GUNNAR.

Nay, nay, he does not so!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Firmly.*] Sigurd and Dagny must die! I cannot draw breath till they two are gone! [*Comes close up to him, with sparkling eyes, and speaks passionately, but in a whisper.*] Wouldst thou help me to t h a t, Gunnar, then should I live in love with thee; then should I clasp thee in such warm and wild embraces as thou dream'st not of.

GUNNAR.

[*Wavering.*] Hiördis! Wouldst thou——?

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HIÖRDIS.

Set thy hand to the work, Gunnar—and the heavy days shall be past. No longer will I quit the hall when thou comest, no longer speak harsh things and quench thy smile when thou art glad. I will clothe me in furs and costly silken robes. When thou goest to war, I will follow thee; when thou ridest forth in peace, I will ride by thy side. At the feast I will sit by thee and fill thy horn, and drink to thee and sing fair songs to make glad thy heart!

GUNNAR.

[*Almost overcome.*] Is it true? Thou wouldst——

HIÖRDIS.

More than that, trust me, ten times more! Give me but revenge! Revenge on Sigurd and Dagny, and I will—— [*Stops as she sees the door open.*] Dagny—comest thou here!

DAGNY.

[*From the back.*] Haste thee, Gunnar! Call thy men to arms!

GUNNAR.

To arms! Against whom?

DAGNY.

Kåre the Peasant is coming, and many outlaws with him; he means thee no good; Sigurd has once barred his way; but who can tell——

GUNNAR.

[*Moved.*] Sigurd has done this for me!

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DAGNY.

Sigurd is ever thy faithful friend.

GUNNAR.

And we, Hiördis—we, who thought to——! It is as I say—there is witchcraft in all thy speech; no deed but seemeth fair to me, when thou dost name it.

DAGNY.

[*Astonished.*] What meanest thou?

GUNNAR.

Nothing, nothing! I thank thee for thy tidings, Dagny; I go to gather my men together. [*Turns towards the door, but stops and comes forward again.*] Tell me—how goes it with Örnulf?

DAGNY.

[*Bowing her head.*] Ask not of him. Yesterday he bore Thorolf's body to the ships; now he is raising a grave-mound on the shore;—there shall his sons be laid.

[GUNNAR *goes out by the back in silence.*

DAGNY.

Until evening there is no danger. [*Coming nearer.*] Hiördis, I have another errand in thy house; it is to thee I come.

HIÖRDIS.

To me? After all that befell yesterday?

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DAGNY.

Even because of that. Hiördis, foster-sister, do not hate me; forget the words that sorrow and evil spirits placed in my mouth; forgive me all the wrong I did thee; for, trust me, I am now tenfold more hapless than thou!

HIÖRDIS.

Hapless—thou! Sigurd's wife!

DAGNY.

It was my doing, all that befell—the stirring up of strife, and Thorolf's death, and all the scorn that fell upon Gunnar and thee. Mine is all the guilt! Woe upon me!—I have lived so happily; but after this day I shall never know joy again.

HIÖRDIS.

[*As if seized by a sudden thought.*] But before—in these five long years—all that time hast thou been happy?

DAGNY.

Canst thou doubt it?

HIÖRDIS.

Yesterday I doubted it not; but——

DAGNY.

What meanest thou?

HIÖRDIS.

Nay, 'tis nought; let us speak of other matters.

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DAGNY.

No truly. Hiördis, tell me——!

HIÖRDIS.

It will profit thee little; but since thou wilt have it so—— [*With a malignant expression.*] Canst thou remember once, over in Iceland—we had followed with Örnulf thy father to the Council, and we sat with our playmates in the Council Hall, as is the manner of women. Then came two strangers into the hall.

DAGNY.

Sigurd and Gunnar.

HIÖRDIS.

They greeted us in courtly fashion, and sat on the bench beside us; and there passed between us much merry talk. There were some who must needs know why these two vikings came thither, and if they were not minded to take them wives there in the island. Then said Sigurd: "'Twill be hard for me to find the woman that shall be to my mind." Örnulf laughed, and said there was no lack of high-born and well-dowered women in Iceland; but Sigurd answered: "The warrior needs a high-souled wife. She whom I choose must not rest content with a humble lot; no honour must seem too high for her to strive for; gladly must she follow me a-viking; war-weed must she wear; she must egg me on to strife, and never blink her eyes where sword-blades lighten; for if she be faint-hearted, scant honour will befall me." Is it not true, so Sigurd spake?

DAGNY.

[*Hesitatingly.*] True, he did—but——

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HIÖRDIS.

S u c h was she to be, the woman who could make life fair to him; and then—[*With a scornful smile*] then he chose t h e e !

DAGNY.

[*Starting, as in pain.*] Ha, thou wouldst say that——?

HIÖRDIS.

Doubtless thou hast proved thyself proud and high-souled; hast claimed honour of all, that Sigurd might be honoured in thee—is it not so?

DAGNY.

Nay, Hiördis, but——

HIÖRDIS.

Thou hast egged him on to great deeds, followed him in war-weed, and joyed to be where the strife raged hottest—hast thou not?

DAGNY.

[*Deeply moved.*] No, no!

HIÖRDIS.

Hast thou, then, been faint of heart, so that Sigurd has been put to shame?

DAGNY.

[*Overwhelmed.*] Hiördis, Hiördis!

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Smiling scornfully.*] Yet thy lot has been a happy one all these years! Think'st thou that Sigurd can say the same?

DAGNY.

Enough, enough. Woe is me! thou hast made me see myself too clearly.

HIÖRDIS.

A jesting word, and straightway thou art in tears! Think no more of it. Look what I have done to-day. [*Takes some arrows from the table.*] Are they not keen and biting—feel! I know well how to sharpen arrows, do I not?

DAGNY.

And to use them too; thou strikest surely, Hiördis! All this thou hast said to me—I had never thought of it before. [*More vehemently.*] But that Sigurd——! That for all these years I should have made his life heavy and unhonoured;—no, no, it cannot be true!

HIÖRDIS.

Nay now, comfort thee, Dagny; indeed it is not true. Were Sigurd of the same mind as in former days, it might be true enough; for then was his whole soul bent on being the foremost man in the land;—now he is content with a lowlier lot.

DAGNY.

No, Hiördis; Sigurd is high-souled now as ever; I see it well, I am not the right mate for him. He has hidden it from me; but it shall be so no longer.

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HIÖRDIS.

What wilt thou do?

DAGNY.

I will no longer hang like a clog upon his feet; I will be a hindrance to him no longer.

HIÖRDIS.

Then thou wilt——?

DAGNY.

Peace; some one comes!

A House-carl enters from the back

THE CARL.

Sigurd Viking is coming to the hall.

HIÖRDIS.

Sigurd! Then call Gunnar hither.

THE CARL.

Gunnar has ridden forth to gather his neighbours together; for Kåre the Peasant would——

HIÖRDIS.

Good, good, I know it; go! [*The Carl goes. To* DAGNY, *who is also going.*] Whither wilt thou?

DAGNY.

I will not meet Sigurd. Too well I feel that we must part; but to meet him now—no, no, I cannot!

[*Goes out to the left.*

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Looks after her in silence for a moment.*] And it was she I would have—— [*Completes her thought by a glance at the bow-string.*] That had been a poor revenge;—nay, I have cut deeper now! 'Tis hard to die, but sometimes harder still to live!

SIGURD *enters from the back.*

HIÖRDIS.

Belike it is Gunnar thou seekest; be seated, he will be here even now. [*Is going.*

SIGURD.

Nay, stay; it is thee I seek, rather than him.

HIÖRDIS.

Me?

SIGURD.

And 'tis well I find thee alone.

HIÖRDIS.

If thou comest to mock me, it would sure be no hindrance to thee though the hall were full of men and women.

SIGURD.

Ay, ay, well I know what thoughts thou hast of me.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Bitterly.*] I do thee wrong mayhap! Nay, nay, Sigurd, thou hast been as a poison to all my days. Be-

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think thee who it was that wrought that shameful guile; who it was that sat by my side in the bower, feigning love, with the laugh of cunning in his heart; who it was that flung me forth to Gunnar, since for him I was good enough, forsooth—and then sailed away with the woman he held dear!

SIGURD.

Man's will can do this thing and that; but fate rules in the deeds that shape our lives—so has it gone with us twain.

HIÖRDIS.

True enough; evil Norns hold sway over the world; but their might is little if they find not helpers in our own heart. Happy is he who has strength to battle with the Norn—and it is that I have now in hand.

SIGURD.

What mean'st thou?

HIÖRDIS.

I will venture a trial of strength against those—those who are over me. But let us talk no more of this; I have much to do to-day. [*She seats herself at the table.*

SIGURD.

[*After a short pause.*] Thou makest good weapons for Gunnar.

HIÖRDIS.

[*With a quiet smile.*] Not f o r Gunnar, but a g a i n s t thee.

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SIGURD.

Most like it is the same thing.

HIÖRDIS.

Ay, most like it is; for if I be a match for the Norn, then sooner or later shalt thou and Gunnar—— [*Breaks off, leans backwards against the table, looks at him with a smile, and says with an altered ring in her voice:*] Wouldst know the thought that sometimes comes to me? Oft have I made it my pastime to limn pleasant pictures in my mind; at such times I sit and close my eyes and think: Now comes Sigurd the Strong to the isle;—he will burn us in our house, me and my husband. All Gunnar's men have fallen; only he and I are left; they set light to the roof from without:—"A bow-shot," cries Gunnar, "one bow-shot may save us";—then the bow-string breaks—"Hiördis, cut a tress of thy hair and make of it a bow-string—our life is at stake." But then I laugh—"Let it burn, let it burn—to me, life is not worth a wisp of hair!"

SIGURD.

There is a strange might in all thy speech.

[*Approaches her.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*Looks coldly at him.*] Wouldst sit beside me?

SIGURD.

Thou deemest my heart is bitter toward thee. 'Tis the last time, Hiördis, that we shall have speech together; there is something that gnaws me like a sore sickness, and in this wise I cannot part from thee; thou must know me better.

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HIÖRDIS.

What wouldst thou?

SIGURD.

Tell thee a saga.

HIÖRDIS.

Is it sad?

SIGURD.

Sad, as life itself.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Bitterly.*] What knowest thou of the sadness of life?

SIGURD.

Judge when my saga is over.

HIÖRDIS.

Then tell it me; I will work the while.

[*He sits on a low stool to her right.*

SIGURD.

Once upon a time there were two young vikings, who set forth from Norway to win wealth and honour; they had sworn each other friendship, and held truly together, how far soever they might fare.

HIÖRDIS.

And the two young vikings hight Sigurd and Gunnar?

SIGURD.

Ay, we may call them so. At last they came to Iceland; and there dwelt an old chieftain, who had come

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forth from Norway in King Harald's days. He had two fair women in his house; but one, his foster-daughter, was the noblest, for she was wise and strong of soul; and the vikings spoke of her between themselves, and never had they seen a fairer woman, so deemed they both.

HIÖRDIS.

[*In suspense.*] Both? Wilt thou mock me?

SIGURD.

Gunnar thought of her night and day, and that did Sigurd no less; but both held their peace, and no man could say from her bearing whether Gunnar found favour in her eyes; but that Sigurd found none, that was easy to discern.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Breathlessly.*] Go on, go on——!

SIGURD.

Yet ever the more must Sigurd dream of her; but of that wist no man. Now it befell one evening that there was a drinking-feast; and there did that proud woman vow that no man should possess her save he who wrought a mighty deed, which she named. Then high beat Sigurd's heart for joy; for he felt within him the strength to do that deed. But Gunnar took him apart and told him of his love;—Sigurd said nought of his, but went to the——

HIÖRDIS.

[*Vehemently.*] Sigurd, Sigurd! [*Controlling herself.*] And this saga—is it true?

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SIGURD.

True it is. One of us had to yield; Gunnar was my friend; I could do nought else. So Gunnar had thee to wife, and I wedded another woman.

HIÖRDIS.

And didst come to love her!

SIGURD.

I learned to prize her; but one woman only has Sigurd loved, and that is she who frowned upon him from the first day they met. [*Rises.*] Here ends my saga; and now let us part.—Farewell, Gunnar's wife; never shall we meet again.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Springing up.*] Stay, stay! Woe to us both; Sigurd, what hast thou done?

SIGURD.

[*Starting.*] I, done? What ails thee?

HIÖRDIS.

And all this dost thou tell me now! But no—it cannot be true!

SIGURD.

These are my last words to thee, and every word is true. I would not thou shouldst think hardly of me, therefore I needs must speak.

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Involuntarily clasps her hands together, and gazes at him in voiceless astonishment.*] Loved—loved me—thou! [*Vehemently, coming close up to him.*] I will not believe thee! [*Looks hard at him, and bursts forth in wild grief.*] Yes, it is true, and—hateful for us both!

[*Hides her face in her hands, and turns away from him.*

SIGURD.

[*Appalled.*] Hiördis!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Softly, struggling with tears and laughter.*] Nay, heed me not! I meant but this, that—— [*Lays her hand on his arm.*] Sigurd, thou hast not told thy saga to the end; that proud woman thou didst tell of—she returned thy love!

SIGURD.

[*Starts backwards.*] Thou?

HIÖRDIS.

[*With composure.*] Aye, Sigurd, I have loved thee, at last I understand it. Thou sayest I was ungentle and short of speech towards thee; what wouldst thou have a woman do? Could I offer thee my love? Then had I been little worthy of thee. I deemed thee ever the noblest man of men; and then to know thee another's husband—'twas that caused me the bitter pain, that myself I could not understand!

SIGURD.

[*Much moved.*] A baleful web has the Norn woven around us twain.

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HIÖRDIS.

The blame is thine own; bravely and firmly it becomes a man to act. When I set that hard proof for him who should win me, my thought was all of thee;—yet couldst thou——!

SIGURD.

I knew Gunnar's soul-sickness; I alone could heal it; —was there aught for me to choose? And yet, had I known what I now know, I scarce dare answer for myself; for great is the might of love.

HIÖRDIS.

[*With animation.*] But now, Sigurd!—A baleful hap has held us apart all these years; now the knot is loosed; the days to come shall make good the past to us.

SIGURD.

[*Shaking his head.*] It cannot be; thou knowest we must part again.

HIÖRDIS.

Nay, we must not. I love thee, that may I now say unashamed; for my love is no mere dalliance, like a weak woman's; were I a man—by all the Mighty Ones, I could still love thee, even as now I do! Up then, Sigurd! Happiness is worth a daring deed; we are both free if we but will it, and then the game is won.

SIGURD.

Free? What meanest thou?

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HIÖRDIS.

What is Dagny to thee? What can she be to thee? No more than I count Gunnar in my secret heart. What matter though two worthless lives be wrecked?

SIGURD.

Hiördis, Hiördis!

HIÖRDIS.

Let Gunnar stay where he is; let Dagny fare with her father to Iceland: I will follow thee in harness of steel, whithersoever thou wendest. [SIGURD *makes a movement.*] Not as thy wife will I follow thee; for I have belonged to another, and the woman lives that has lain by thy side. No, Sigurd, not as thy wife, but like those mighty women, like Hildë's sisters,[1] will I follow thee, and fire thee to strife and to manly deeds, so that thy name shall be heard over every land. In the sword-game will I stand by thy side; I will fare forth among thy warriors in the storm and on the viking-raid; and when thy death-song is sung, it shall tell of Sigurd and Hiördis in one!

SIGURD.

Once was that my fairest dream; now, it is too late. Gunnar and Dagny stand between us, and that by right. I crushed my new-born love for Gunnar's sake;—how great soever my suffering, I cannot undo my deed. And Dagny—full of faith and trust she left her home and kindred; never must she dream that I longed for Hiördis as often as she took me to her breast.

[1] The Valkyries.

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HIÖRDIS.

And for such a cause wilt thou lay a burden on all thy life! To what end hast thou strength and might, and therewith all noble gifts of the mind? And deemest thou it can now beseem me to dwell beneath Gunnar's roof? Nay, Sigurd, trust me, there are many tasks awaiting such a man as thou. Erik is king in Norway—do thou rise against him! Many goodly warriors will join thee and swear thee fealty; with unconquerable might will we press onward, and fight and toil unresting, until thou art seated on the throne of Hårfager!

SIGURD.

Hiördis, Hiördis, so have I dreamt in my wild youth; let it be forgotten—tempt me not!

HIÖRDIS.

[*With dignity.*] It is the Norn's will that we two shall hold together; it cannot be altered. Plainly now I see my task in life: to make thee famous over all the world. Thou hast stood before me every day, every hour of my life; I sought to tear thee out of my mind, but I lacked the might; now it is needless, now that I know thou lovest me.

SIGURD.

[*With forced coldness.*] If that be so—then know—I h a v e loved thee; it has passed now;—I have forgot those days.

HIÖRDIS.

Sigurd, in that thou liest! So much at least am I worth, that if thou hast loved me once, thou canst never forget it.

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SIGURD.

[*Vehemently.*] I must; and now I will.

HIÖRDIS.

So be it; but thou c a n s t not. Thou wilt seek to hinder me, but in vain; ere evening falls, Gunnar and Dagny shall know all.

SIGURD.

Ha, that wilt thou never do!

HIÖRDIS.

That will I do!

SIGURD.

Then must I know thee ill; high-souled have I ever deemed thee.

HIÖRDIS.

Evil days breed evil thoughts; too great has been thy trust in me. I will, I must, go forth by thy side—forth to face life and strife; Gunnar's roof-tree is too low for me.

SIGURD.

[*With emphasis.*] But honour between man and man hast thou highly prized. There lack not grounds for strife between me and Gunnar; say, now, that he fell by my hand—wouldst thou still make all known and follow me?

HIÖRDIS.

[*Starting.*] Wherefore askest thou?

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SIGURD.

Answer me first: what wouldst thou do, were I to give thy husband his bane.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Looks hard at him.*] Then must I keep silence and never rest until I had seen thee dead.

SIGURD.

[*With a smile.*] It is well, Hiördis—I knew it.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Hastily.*] But it can never come to pass!

SIGURD.

It must come to pass; thou thyself hast cast the die even now for Gunnar's life and mine.

[GUNNAR, *with some House-carls, enters from the back.*

GUNNAR.

[*Gloomily, to* HIÖRDIS.] See now; the seed thou hast sown is sprouting!

SIGURD.

[*Approaching.*] What is amiss with thee?

GUNNAR.

Sigurd, is it thou? What is amiss? Nought but what I might well have foreseen. As soon as Dagny, thy wife, had brought tidings of Kåre the Peasant, I took horse and rode to my neighbours to seek help against him.

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Eagerly.*] Well?

GUNNAR.

I was answered awry where'er I came: my dealings with Kåre had been little to my honour, it was said;—aye, and other things were said to boot, that I will not utter—I am a dishonoured man; I am thought to have done a dastard deed; men hold it shame to make common cause with me.

SIGURD.

It shall not long be held shame; ere evening comes, thou shalt have men enough to face Kåre.

GUNNAR.

Sigurd!

HIÖRDIS.

[*In a low voice, triumphantly.*] Ha, I knew it well!

SIGURD.

[*With forced resolution.*] But thereafter is the peace between us at an end; for hearken to my words, Gunnar Headman—thou hast slain Thorolf, my wife's kinsman, and therefore do I challenge thee to single combat[1] to-morrow at break of day.

[HIÖRDIS, *in violent inward emotion, makes a stride towards* SIGURD, *but collects herself and remains standing motionless during the following.*

GUNNAR.

[*In extreme astonishment.*] To single combat——! Me!—Thou art jesting, Sigurd!

[1] *Holmgang*—see note, p. 36.

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SIGURD.

Thou art lawfully challenged to single combat; 'twill be a game for life or death; one of us must fall!

GUNNAR.

[*Bitterly.*] Ha, I understand it well. When I came, thou didst talk with Hiördis alone; she has goaded thee afresh!

SIGURD.

Mayhap. [*Half towards* HIÖRDIS.] A high-souled woman must ever guard her husband's honour. [*To the men in the background.*] And do ye, House-carls, now go to Gunnar's neighbours, and say to them that to-morrow he is to ply sword-strokes with me; none dare call that man a dastard who bears arms against Sigurd Viking!

[*The House-carls go out by the back.*

GUNNAR.

[*Goes quickly up to* SIGURD *and presses his hands, in strong emotion.*] Sigurd, my brave brother, now I understand thee! Thou venturest thy life for my honour, as of old for my happiness!

SIGURD.

Thank my wife for that; she has the main part in what I do. To-morrow at break of day——

GUNNAR.

I will meet thee. [*Tenderly.*] Foster-brother, wilt thou have a good blade of me? 'Tis a gift of price.

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SIGURD.

I thank thee; but let it hang.—Who knows if next evening I may have any use for it.

GUNNAR.

[*Shakes his hand.*] Farewell, Sigurd!

SIGURD.

Again farewell, and fortune befriend thee this night!

[*They part.* GUNNAR *goes out to the right.* SIGURD *casts a glance at* HIÖRDIS, *and goes out by the back.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*After a pause, softly and thoughtfully.*] To-morrow they fight! Which will fall? [*After a moment's silence, she bursts forth as if seized by a strong resolution.*] Let fall who will—Sigurd and I shall still be together.

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ACT FOURTH

By the coast. It is evening; the moon breaks forth now and again, from among dark and ragged storm-clouds. At the back, a black grave-mound, newly heaped up. ÖRNULF *sits on a stone, in front on the right, his head bare, his elbows resting on his knees, and his face buried in his hands. His men are digging at the mound; some give light with pine-knot torches. After a short pause,* SIGURD *and* DAGNY *enter from the boat-house, where a wood fire is burning.*

DAGNY.

[*In a low voice.*] There sits he still. [*Holding* SIGURD *back.*] Nay, speak not to him.

SIGURD.

Thou say'st well; it is too soon; best leave him to himself.

DAGNY.

[*Goes over to the right, and gazes at her father in quiet sorrow.*] So strong was he yesterday when he bore Thorolf's body on his back; strong was he as he helped to heap the grave-mound; but when they were all laid to rest, and earth and stones piled over them—then the sorrow seized him; then seemed it of a sudden as though his fire were quenched. [*Dries her tears.*] Tell me, Sigurd, when thinkest thou to fare homeward to Iceland?

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SIGURD.

So soon as the storm abates, and my dealings with Gunnar are ended.

DAGNY.

And then wilt thou buy land and build thee a homestead, and go a-viking no more?

SIGURD.

Yes, yes,—that have I promised thee.

DAGNY.

And I may believe without doubt that Hiördis spoke falsely when she said that I was unworthy to be thy wife?

SIGURD.

Yes, yes, Dagny, trust thou to my word.

DAGNY.

Then am I glad again, and will try to forget all the evil that here has been wrought. In the long winter evenings we will talk together of Gunnar and Hiördis, and——

SIGURD.

Nay, Dagny, wouldst thou have things go well with us, never do thou speak Hiördis' name when once we are at home in Iceland.

DAGNY.

[*Mildly upbraiding him.*] Unjust is thy hatred towards her. Sigurd, Sigurd, it is little like thee.

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ONE OF THE MEN.

[*Approaching.*] There now, the mound is finished.

ÖRNULF.

[*As if awaking.*] The mound? Is it—ay, ay——

SIGURD.

Now speak to him, Dagny.

DAGNY.

[*Approaching.*] Father, it is cold out here; the storm is rising with the night.

ÖRNULF.

Nay, never heed it; the mound is close-heaped and crannyless; they lie warm in there.

DAGNY.

Ay, but thou——

ÖRNULF.

I? I am not cold.

DAGNY.

Nought hast thou eaten to-day; wilt thou not go in? The supper-board stands ready.

ÖRNULF.

Let the supper-board stand; I have no hunger.

DAGNY.

But to sit here so still—trust me, thou wilt take hurt of it; thou art ever wont to be stirring.

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ÖRNULF.

May be so; there is somewhat that crushes my breast; I cannot draw breath.

[*He again hides his face in his hands. A pause.* DAGNY *seats herself beside him.*

DAGNY.

To-morrow wilt thou make ready thy ship and set forth for Iceland?

ÖRNULF.

[*Without looking up.*] What should I do there? Nay, I will to my sons.

DAGNY.

[*With pain.*] Father!

ÖRNULF.

[*Raises his head.*] Go in and let me sit here; when the storm has played with me for a night or two, the game will be over, I ween.

SIGURD.

Thou canst not think to deal thus with thyself.

ÖRNULF.

Dost marvel that I fain would rest? My day's work is done; I have laid my sons in their grave-mound. [*Vehemently.*] Go from me!—Go, go!

[*He hides his face.*

SIGURD.

[*Softly, to* DAGNY, *who rises.*] Let him sit yet awhile.

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DAGNY.

Nay, I have one rede yet untried;—I know him. [*To* ÖRNULF.] Thy day's work done, say'st thou? Nay, that it is not. Thou hast laid thy sons in the grave;—but art thou not a skald? It is meet that thou should'st sing their memory.

ÖRNULF.

[*Shaking his head.*] Sing? Nay, nay; yesterday I could sing; I am too old to-day.

DAGNY.

But needs must thou; honourable men were thy sons, one and all; a song must be made of them, and that can none of our kin but thou.

ÖRNULF.

[*Looks inquiringly at* SIGURD.] To sing? What thinkest t h o u, Sigurd?

SIGURD.

Meseems it is but meet; thou must e'en do as she says.

DAGNY.

Thy neighbours in Iceland will deem it ill done when the grave-ale is drunk over Örnulf's children, and there is no song to sing with it. Thou hast ever time enough to follow thy sons.

ÖRNULF.

Well well, I will try it; and thou, Dagny, give heed, that afterwards thou mayst carve the song on staves.

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The men approach with the torches, forming a group around him; he is silent for a time, reflecting; then he says:

Bragi's[1] gift is bitter
when the heart is broken;
sorrow-laden singer,
singing, suffers sorely.

Natheless, since the Skald-god
gave me skill in song-craft,
in a lay loud-ringing
be my loss lamented! [*Rises.*

Ruthless Norn[2] and wrathful
wrecked my life and ravaged,
wiled away my welfare,
wasted Örnulf's treasure.

Sons had Örnulf seven,
by the great gods granted;—
lonely now and life-sick
goes the greybeard, sonless.

Seven sons so stately,
bred among the sword-blades,
made a mighty bulwark
round the snow-locked sea-king.

Levelled lies the bulwark,
dead my sons strong-hearted;
gone the greybeard's gladness,
desolate his dwelling.

[1] Bragi, the god of poetry and eloquence.
[2] See note, p. 92.

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Thorolf,—thou my last-born!
'Mongst the bold the boldest!
Soon were spent my sorrow
so but thou wert left me!

Fair thou wast as springtide,
fond towards thy father,
waxing straight and stalwart
to so wight a warrior.

Dark and drear his death-wound
leaves my life's lone evening;
grief hath gripped my bosom
as 'twixt hurtling targes.

Nought the Norn denied me
of her rueful riches,
showering woes unstinted
over Örnulf's world-way.

Weak are now my weapons.
But, were god-might given me,
o n e thing would I strive for—
on the Norn to venge me!

O n e thing would I toil for—
down to death to hurl thee,
Norn, that now hast left me
nought but yonder grave-mound.

Nought, I said? Nay, truly,
somewhat still is Örnulf's,
since of Suttung's[1] mead-horn
he betimes drank deeply.

[*With rising enthusiasm.*

[1] Suttung was a giant who kept guard over the magic mead of poetical inspiration.

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Though she stripped me sonless,
one great gift she gave me—
songcraft's mighty secret,
skill to sing my sorrows.

On my lips she laid it,
goodly gift of songcraft;
loud, then, let my lay sound,
e'en where they are lying!

Hail, my stout sons seven!
Hail, as homeward ride ye!
Songcraft's glorious god-gift
stauncheth woe and wailing.

[*He draws a deep breath, throws back the hair from his brow, and says calmly:*

So—so; now is Örnulf sound and strong again. [*To the men.*] Follow me to the supper-board, lads; heavy has been our day's work!

[*Goes with the men into the boat-house.*

DAGNY.

Praised be the Mighty Ones on high that gave me so good a rede. [*To* SIGURD.] Wilt thou not go in?

SIGURD.

Nay, I list not to. Tell me, are all things ready for to-morrow?

DAGNY.

They are ready; a silk-sewn shroud lies on the bench; but I know full surely that thou wilt hold thee against Gunnar, so I have not wept over it.

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SIGURD.

Grant all good powers, that thou mayest never weep for my sake. [*He stops and looks out.*

DAGNY.

What art thou listening to?

SIGURD.

Hear'st thou nought—y o n d e r?
[*Points towards the left.*

DAGNY.

Ay, there goes a fearsome storm over the sea!

SIGURD.

[*Going up a little towards the background.*] There will fall hard hailstones in that storm. [*Shouts.*] Who comes?

KÅRE THE PEASANT.

[*Without on the left.*] Folk thou wotst of, Sigurd Viking!

KÅRE THE PEASANT, *with a band of armed men, enters from the left.*

SIGURD.

Whither would ye?

KÅRE.

To Gunnar's hall.

SIGURD.

As foemen?

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KÅRE.

Ay, trust me for that! Thou didst hinder me before; but now I ween thou wilt scarce do the like.

SIGURD.

Maybe not.

KÅRE.

I have heard of thy challenge to Gunnar; but if things go to my mind, weak will be his weapons when the time comes for your meeting.

SIGURD.

'Tis venturesome work thou goest about; take heed for thyself, Peasant!

KÅRE.

[*With defiant laughter.*] Leave that to me; wouldst thou tackle thy ship to-night, we will see that thou hast light enow!—Come, all my men; here goes the way.

[*They go off to the right, at the back.*

DAGNY.

Sigurd, Sigurd, this misdeed must thou hinder.

SIGURD.

[*Goes quickly to the door of the hut, and calls in.*] Up from the board, Örnulf; take vengeance on Kåre the Peasant!

ÖRNULF.

[*Comes out, with the rest.*] Kåre the Peasant—where is he?

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SIGURD.

He is making for Gunnar's hall to burn it over their heads.

ÖRNULF.

Ha-ha—let him do as he will; so shall I be avenged on Gunnar and Hiördis, and afterwards I can deal with Kåre.

SIGURD.

Nay, that rede avails not; wouldst thou strike at Kåre, thou must seek him out to-night; for when his misdeed is done, he will take to the mountains. I have challenged Gunnar to meet me, man to man; him thou hast safe enough, unless I myself—but no matter.—To-night he must be shielded from his foes; it would ill befit thee to let so vile a caitiff as Kåre rob thee of thy revenge.

ÖRNULF.

Thou say'st truly. To-night will I shield the slayer of Thorolf; but to-morrow he must die.

SIGURD.

He or I—doubt not of that!

ÖRNULF.

Come then, to take vengeance for Örnulf's sons.

[*He goes out with his men by the back, to the right.*

SIGURD.

Dagny, do thou follow them;—I must bide here; for the rumour of the combat is already abroad, and I may not meet Gunnar ere the time comes. But thou—do

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thou keep rein on thy father; he must go honourably to work; in Gunnar's hall there are many women; no harm must befall Hiördis or the rest.

DAGNY.

Yes, I will follow them. Thou takest thought even for Hiördis; I thank thee for it.

SIGURD.

Go, go, Dagny!

DAGNY.

I go; but be thou at ease as to Hiördis; she has gilded armour in her bower, and will know how to shield herself.

SIGURD.

That deem I too; but go thou nevertheless; guide thy father's course; watch over all—and over Gunnar's wife!

DAGNY.

Trust to me. Farewell, till we meet again!

[*She follows the others.*

SIGURD.

'Tis the first time, foster-brother, that I stand weaponless whilst thou art in danger. [*Listens.*] I hear shouts and sword-strokes;—they are already at the hall. [*Goes towards the right, but stops and recoils in astonishment.*] Hiördis! Comes she hither!

HIÖRDIS *enters, clad in a short scarlet kirtle, with gilded armour; helmet, hauberk, arm-plates, and greaves. Her hair is flying loose; at her back hangs a quiver, and at her belt a small shield. She has in her hand the bow strung with her hair.*

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HIÖRDIS.

[*Hastily looking behind her, as though in dread of something pursuing her, goes close up to* SIGURD, *seizes him by the arm, and whispers:*] Sigurd, Sigurd, canst thou see it?

SIGURD.

What? Where?

HIÖRDIS.

The wolf t h e r e—close behind me; it does not move; it glares at me with its two red eyes. It is my wraith.[1] Sigurd! Three times has it appeared to me; that bodes that I shall surely die to-night!

SIGURD.

Hiördis, Hiördis!

HIÖRDIS.

It has sunk into the earth! Aye, aye, now it has warned me.

SIGURD.

Thou art sick; come, go in with me.

HIÖRDIS.

Nay, here will I bide; I have but little time left.

SIGURD.

What has befallen thee?

[1] The word "wraith" is here used in an obviously inexact sense; but the wraith seemed to be the nearest equivalent in English mythology to the Scandinavian "fylgie," an attendant spirit, often regarded as a sort of emanation from the person it accompanied, and sometimes (as in this case) typifying that person's moral attributes.

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HIÖRDIS.

What has befallen? That know I not; but 'twas true what thou said'st to-day, that Gunnar and Dagny stand between us; we must away from them and from life; then can we be together!

SIGURD.

We? Ha, thou meanest——.

HIÖRDIS.

[*With dignity.*] I have been homeless in this world from that day thou didst take another to wife. That was ill done of thee! All good gifts may a man give to his faithful friend—all, save the woman he loves; for if he do that, he rends the Norn's secret web, and two lives are wrecked. An unerring voice within me tells me I came into the world that my strong soul might cheer and uphold thee through heavy days, and that thou wert born to the end I might find in o n e man all that seemed to me great and noble; for this I know, Sigurd—had we two held together, then hadst thou become more famous than all others, and I happier.

SIGURD.

It avails not now to mourn. Think'st thou 'tis a merry life that awaits me? To be by Dagny's side day by day, and feign a love my heart shrinks from? Yet so it must be; it cannot be altered.

HIÖRDIS.

[*In a growing frenzy.*] It s h a l l be altered! We must out of this life, both of us! Seest thou this bow-

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string? With it can I surely hit my mark; for I have crooned fair sorceries over it! [*Places an arrow in the bow, which is strung.*] Hark! hark! that rushing in the air? It is the dead men's ride to Valhal: I have bewitched them hither;—we two will join them in their ride!

SIGURD.

[*Shrinking back.*] Hiördis, Hiördis—I fear thee!

HIÖRDIS.

[*Not heeding him.*] Our fate no power can alter now! Oh, 'tis better so than if thou hadst wedded me here in this life—if I had sat in thy homestead weaving linen and wool for thee and bearing thee children—pah!

SIGURD.

Hold, hold! Thy sorceries have been too strong for thee; they have made thee soul-sick, Hiördis! [*Horror-struck.*] Ha, see—see! Gunnar's hall—it is burning!

HIÖRDIS.

Let it burn, let it burn! The cloud-hall up yonder is loftier than Gunnar's rafter-roof!

SIGURD.

But Egil, thy son—they are slaying him!

HIÖRDIS.

Let him die—my shame dies with him.

SIGURD.

And Gunnar—they are taking thy husband's life!

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HIÖRDIS.

What care I! A better husband shall I follow home this night! Ay, Sigurd, so must it be; here on this earth grows no happiness for me. The White God is coming northward; him will I not meet; the old gods are strong no longer;—they sleep, they sit half shadow-like on high;—with them will we strive! Out of this life, Sigurd! I will enthrone thee king in heaven, and I myself will sit by thy side. [*The storms bursts wildly.*] Hark, hark, here comes our company! Canst see the black steeds galloping?—one is for me and one for thee. [*Draws the arrow to her ear and shoots.*] Away, then, on thy last ride home!

SIGURD.

Well aimed, Hiördis! [*He falls.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*Jubilant, rushes up to him.*] Sigurd, my brother,—now art thou mine at last!

SIGURD.

Now less than ever. Here our ways part; for I am a Christian man.

HIÖRDIS.

[*Appalled.*] Thou——! Ha, no, no!

SIGURD.

The White God is mine; King Æthelstan taught me to know him; it is to h i m I go.

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HIÖRDIS.

[*In despair.*] And I——! [*Drops her bow.*] Woe! woe!

SIGURD.

Heavy has my life been from the hour I tore thee out of my own heart and gave thee to Gunnar. I thank thee, Hiördis;—now am I so light and free. [*Dies.*

HIÖRDIS.

[*Quietly.*] Dead! Then truly have I brought my soul to wreck. [*The storm increases; she breaks forth wildly.*] They come! I have bewitched them hither! No, no! I will not go with you! I will not ride without Sigurd! It avails not—they see me; they laugh and beckon to me; they spur their horses! [*Rushes out to the edge of the cliff at the back.*] They are upon me;—and no shelter, no hiding-place! Ay, mayhap at the bottom of the sea! [*She casts herself over.*

[ÖRNULF, DAGNY, GUNNAR, *with* EGIL, *gradually followed by* SIGURD'S *and* ÖRNULF'S *men, enter from the right.*

ÖRNULF.

[*Turning towards the grave-mound.*] Now may ye sleep in peace; for ye lie not unavenged.

DAGNY.

[*Entering.*] Father, father—I die of fear—all that blood and strife—and the storm;—hark, hark!

GUNNAR.

[*Carrying* EGIL.] Peace, and shelter for my child.

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ÖRNULF.

Gunnar!

GUNNAR.

Ay, Örnulf, my homestead is burnt and my men are slain; I am in thy power; do with me what thou wilt!

ÖRNULF.

That Sigurd must look to. But in, under roof! It is not safe out here.

DAGNY.

Ay, ay, in! [*Goes towards the boat-house, catches sight of* SIGURD'S *body, and shrieks.*] Sigurd, my husband!—They have slain him! [*Throwing herself upon him.*

ÖRNULF.

[*Rushes up.*] Sigurd!

GUNNAR.

[*Sets* EGIL *down.*] Sigurd dead!

DAGNY.

[*Looks despairingly at the men, who surround the body.*] No, no, it is not so;—he must be alive! [*Catches sight of the bow.*] Ha, what is that? [*Rises.*

ÖRNULF.

Daughter, it is as first thou saidst—Sigurd is slain.

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GUNNAR.

[*As if seized by a sudden thought.*] And Hiördis!—Has Hiördis been here?

DAGNY.

[*Softly and with self-control.*] I know not; but this I know, that her bow has been here.

GUNNAR.

Ay, I thought no less!

DAGNY.

Hush, hush! [*To herself.*] So bitterly did she hate him!

GUNNAR.

[*Aside.*] She has slain him—the night before the combat; then after all she loved me.

[*A thrill of dread runs through the whole group;* ASGÅRDSREIEN—*the ride of the fallen warriors to Valhal—hurtles through the air.*

EGIL.

[*In terror.*] Father! See, see!

GUNNAR.

What is it?

EGIL.

Up there—all the black horses——!

GUNNAR.

It is the clouds that——

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ÖRNULF.

Nay, it is the dead men's home-faring.

EGIL.

[*With a shriek.*] Mother is with them!

DAGNY.

All good spirits!

GUNNAR.

Child, what say'st thou?

EGIL.

There—in front—on the black horse! Father, father!

[EGIL *clings in terror to his father; a short pause; the storm passes over, the clouds part, the moon shines peacefully on the scene.*

GUNNAR.

[*In quiet sorrow.*] Now is Hiördis surely dead.

ÖRNULF.

So it must be, Gunnar;—and my vengeance was rather against her than thee. Dear has this meeting been to both of us;—there is my hand; be there peace between us!

GUNNAR.

Thanks, Örnulf! And now aboard; I sail with thee to Iceland.

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ÖRNULF.

Ay, to Iceland! Long will it be ere our forth-faring is forgotten.

Weapon-wielding warriors' meeting,
woful, by the norland seaboard,
still shall live in song and saga
while our stem endures in Iceland.

THE END

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THE PRETENDERS

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THE PRETENDERS

INTRODUCTION *

Six years elapsed between the composition of *The Vikings* and that of *The Pretenders*.[1] In the interval Ibsen wrote *Love's Comedy*, and brought all the world of Norwegian philistinism, and (as we should now say) suburbanism, about his ears. Whereas hitherto his countrymen had ignored, they now execrated him. In his autobiographic letter of 1870, to Peter Hansen, he wrote: "The only person who at that time approved of the book was my wife. . . . My countrymen excommunicated me. All were against me. The fact that all were against me—that there was no longer any one outside my own family circle of whom I could say 'He believes in me'—must, as you can easily see, have aroused a mood which found its outlet in *The Pretenders*." It is to be noted that this was written during a period of estrangement from Björnson. I do not know what was Björnson's attitude towards *Love's Comedy* in particular; but there can be no doubt that, in general, he believed in and encouraged his brother poet, and employed his own

[1] The original title *Kongsemnerne* might be more literally translated "The Scions of Royalty." It is rendered by Brandes in German "Königsmaterie," or "the stuff from which kings are made."

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growing influence in efforts to his advantage. In representing himself as standing quite alone, Ibsen probably forgets, for the moment, his relation to his great contemporary.

Yet the relation to Björnson lay at the root of the character-contrast on which *The Pretenders* is founded. Ibsen always insisted that each of his plays gave poetic form to some motive gathered from his own experience or observation; and this is very clearly true of the present play. Ever since *Synnöve Solbakken* had appeared in 1857, Björnson, the expansive, eloquent, lyrical Björnson, had been the darling child of fortune. He had gone from success to success unwearied. He was recognised throughout Scandinavia (in Denmark no less than in Norway) as the leader of the rising generation in almost every branch of imaginative literature. He was full, not only of inspiration and energy, but of serene self-confidence. Meanwhile Ibsen, nearly five years older than he, had been pursuing his slow and painful course of development, in comparative obscurity, in humiliating poverty, and amid almost complete lack of appreciation. "Mr. Ibsen is a great cipher" (or "nullity"), wrote a critic in 1858; another, in 1863, laid it down that "Ibsen has a certain technical and artistic talent, but nothing of what can be called 'genius.'" The scoffs of the critics, however, were not the sorest trials that he had to bear. What was hardest to contend against was the doubt as to his own poetic calling and election that constantly beset him. This doubt could not but be generated by the very tardiness of his mental growth. We see him again and again (in the case of *Olaf Liliekrans*, of *The Vikings*, of *Love's*

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Comedy, and of *The Pretenders* itself), conceiving a plan and then abandoning it for years—no doubt because he found himself, in one respect or another, unripe for its execution. Every such experience must have involved for him days and weeks of fruitless effort and discouragement. To these moods of scepticism as to his own powers he gave expression in a series of poems (for the most part sonnets) published in 1859 under the title of *In the Picture Gallery*. In it he represents the "black elf" of doubt, whispering to him: "Your soul is like the dry bed of a mountain stream, in which the singing waters of poetry have ceased to flow. If a faint sound comes rustling down the empty channel, do not imagine that it portends the return of the waters—it is only the dry leaves eddying before the autumn wind, and pattering among the barren stones." In those years of struggle and stress, of depressing criticism, and enervating self-criticism, he must often have compared his own lot and his own character with Björnson's, and perhaps, too, wondered whether there were no means by which he could appropriate to himself some of his younger and more facile brother-poet's kingly self-confidence. For this relation between two talents he partly found and partly invented a historic parallel in the relation between two rival pretenders to the Norwegian throne, Håkon Håkonsson and Skule Bårdsson.

Dr. Brandes, who has admirably expounded the personal element in the genesis of this play, compares Håkon-Björnson and Skule-Ibsen with the Aladdin and Nureddin of Oehlenschläger's beautiful dramatic poem. Aladdin is the born genius, serene, light-hearted, a trifle shallow,

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who grasps the magic lamp with an unswerving confidence in his right to it. ("It is that which the Romans called *ingenium*," says Bishop Nicholas, "truly I am not strong in Latin; but 'twas called *ingenium*.") Nureddin, on the other hand, is the far profounder, more penetrating, but sceptical and self-torturing spirit. When at last he seizes Aladdin's lamp, as Skule annexes Håkon's king's thought, his knees tremble, and it drops from his grasp, just as the Genie is ready to obey him.

It is needless to cite the passages from the scenes between Skule and Bishop Nicholas in the second act, Skule and Håkon in the third, Skule and Jatgeir in the fourth, in which this element of personal symbolism is present. The reader will easily recognise them, while recognising at the same time that their dramatic appropriateness, their relevance to the historic situation as the poet viewed it, is never for a moment impaired. The underlying meaning is never allowed to distort or denaturalise the surface aspect of the picture.[1] The play may be read, understood, and fully appreciated, by a person for whom this underlying meaning has no existence. One does not point it out as an essential element in the work of art, or even as adding to its merit, but simply as affording a particularly clear instance of Ibsen's method of interweaving "Wahrheit" with "Dichtung."

So early as 1858, soon after the completion of *The Vikings*, Ibsen had been struck by the dramatic material in *Håkon Håkonsson's Saga*, as related by Snorri Sturlas-

[1] This remark does not apply, of course, to the satiric "parabasis" uttered by the Bishop's ghost in the fifth act. That is a totally different matter.

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son's nephew, Sturla Thordsson, and had sketched a play on the subject. At that time, however, he put the draft aside. It was only as the years went on, as he found himself "excommunicated" after *Love's Comedy*, and as the contrast between Björnson's fortune and his own became ever more marked, that the figures of Skule and Håkon took more and more hold upon his imagination. In June, 1863, he attended a "Festival of Song" at Bergen, and there met Björnson, who had been living abroad since 1860. Probably under the stimulus of this meeting, he set to work upon *The Pretenders* immediately on his return to Christiania, and wrote it with almost incredible rapidity. The manuscript went to the printers in September; the book was published in October, 1863 (though dated 1864), and the play was produced at the Christiania Theatre, under the author's own supervision, on January 17, 1864. The production was notably successful; yet no one seems fully to have realised what it meant for Norwegian literature. Outside of Norway, at any rate, it awoke no echo. George Brandes declares that scarcely a score of copies of the play found their way to Denmark. Not until Ibsen had left Norway (April, 1864) and had taken the Danish reading public by storm with *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, did people turn back to *The Pretenders* and discover what an extraordinary achievement it was. In January, 1871, it was produced at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, where Emil Poulsen found in Bishop Nicholas one of the great triumphs of his career. It was produced by the Meiningen Company and at the Munich Hoftheater in 1875, in Stockholm in 1879, at the Königliches Schauspielhaus, Berlin, and at the Vienna

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Burgtheater in 1891; and it has from time to time been acted at many other Scandinavian and German theatres.[1] The character of Nicholas has fascinated many great actors: what a pity that it did not come in the way of Sir Henry Irving when he was at the height of his power! But of course no English actor-manager would dream of undertaking a character which dies in the middle of the third act.

Ibsen's treatment of history in this play may be proposed as a model to other historic dramatists. Although he has invented a great deal, his inventions supplement rather than contradict the records. Chronology, indeed, he treats with considerable freedom, and at the same time with ingenious vagueness. The general impression one receives in reading the play is that the action covers a space of four or five years; as a matter of fact it covers twenty-two years, between the folkmote in Bergen, 1218, and Skule's death, 1240. All the leading characters are historical; and although much is read into them which history does not warrant, there is little that history absolutely forbids us to conceive. The general features of the struggle between the two factions—Håkon's Birkebeiner, or Birchlegs, and Skule's Vargbælgs—are correctly enough reproduced. In his treatment of this period, the Norwegian historian, J. E. Sars, writing thirteen years after the appearance of *The Pretenders*, uses terms which might almost have been suggested by Ibsen's play. "On the one side," he says, "we find strength and

[1] In America it was acted in April, 1907, by the Yale University Dramatic Association, but has not as yet (1911) found its way to the professional stage.

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certainty, on the other lameness and lack of confidence. The old Birchlegs[1] go to work openly and straightforwardly, like men who are immovably convinced of the justice of their cause, and unwaveringly assured of its ultimate victory. Skule's adherents, on the other hand, are ever seeking by intrigues and chicanery to place stumbling-blocks in the way of their opponents' enthusiasm." Håkon represented Sverre's ideal of a democratic kingship, independent of the oligarchy of bishops and barons. "He was," says Sars, "reared in the firm conviction of his right to the Throne; he grew up among the veterans of his grandfather's time, men imbued with Sverre's principles, from whom he accepted them as a ready-made system, the realisation of which could only be a question of time. He stood from the first in a clear and straightforward position to which his whole personality corresponded. . . . He owed his chief strength to the repose and equilibrium of mind which distinguished him, and had its root in his unwavering sense of having right and the people's will upon his side." His great "king's-thought," however, seems to be an invention of the poet's. Skule, on the other hand, represented the old nobility in its struggle against the new monarchy. "He was the centre of a hierarchic aristocratic party; but after its repeated defeats this party must have been lacking alike in number and in confidence. . . . It was clear from the first that his attempt to reawaken the old wars of the succession in Norway was undertaken in the spirit of the desperate gambler, who does not count the chances, but

[1] The followers of Håkon's grandfather, King Sverre. See Note, p. 161.

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throws at random, in the blind hope that luck may befriend him. . . . Skule's enterprise had thus no support in opinion or in any prevailing interest, and one defeat was sufficient to crush him."

In the character of Bishop Nicholas, too, Ibsen has widened and deepened his historical material, rather than poetised with a free hand. "Bishop Nicholas," says Sars, "represented rather the aristocracy . . . than the cloth to which he belonged. He had begun his career as a worldly chieftain, and, as such, taken part in Magnus Erlingsson's struggles with Sverre; and although he must have had some tincture of letters, since he could contrive to be elected a bishop . . . there is no lack of indications that his spiritual lore was not of the deepest. During his long participation in the civil broils, both under Sverre and later, we see in him a man to whose character any sort of religious or ecclesiastical enthusiasm must have been foreign, his leading motives being personal ambition and vengefulness rather than any care for general interests—a cold and calculating nature, shrewd but petty and without any impetus, of whom Håkon Håkonsson, in delivering his funeral speech . . . could find nothing better to say than that he had not his equal in worldly wisdom (*veraldar vit*)." I cannot find that the Bishop played any such prominent part in the struggle between the King and the Earl as Ibsen assigns to him; and the only foundation for the great death-bed scene seems to be the following passage from *Håkon Håkonsson's Saga*, Cap. 138: "As Bishop Nicholas at that time lay very sick, he sent a messenger to the King praying him to come to him. The King had on this expedition seized certain letters, from

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which he gathered that the Bishop had not been true to him. With this he upbraided him, and the Bishop, confessing it, prayed the King to forgive him. The King replied that he did so willingly, for God's sake; and as he could discern that the Bishop lay near to death, he abode with him until God called him from the world."

In the introduction to *The Vikings at Helgeland*, I have suggested that in that play Ibsen had reached imaginative and technical maturity, but was as yet intellectually immature. The six years that elapsed between *The Vikings* and *The Pretenders* placed him at the height of his intellectual power. We have only to compare Skule, Håkon, and Bishop Nicholas with Gunnar, Sigurd, and Örnulf to feel that we have passed from nobly-designed and more or less animated waxworks to complex and profoundly-studied human beings. There is no Hiördis in *The Pretenders*, and the female character-drawing is still controlled by purely romantic ideals;[1] but how exquisitely human is Margrete in comparison with the almost entirely conventional Dagny! The criticism of life, too, which in *The Vikings* is purely sentimental, here becomes intense and searching. The only point of superiority in *The Vikings*—if it be a point of superiority—is purely techni-

[1] On page 323 will be found a reference to Brandes's *Ibsen and Björnson;* but I may as well give here the substance of the passage. In the original form of the play, three speeches of Ingeborg's, in her scene with Skule, ran as follows: "It is man's right to forget," "It is woman's happiness to remember," and "To have to sacrifice all and be forgotten, that is woman's saga." It was only on Brandes's remonstrance that Ibsen substituted the present form of these speeches, in which they became, not the generalised expression of an ideal, but merely utterances of Ingeborg's individual character.

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cal. The action of the earlier play is concentrated and rounded. It has all the "unity," or "unities," that a rational criticism can possibly demand. In a word, it is, in form as well as essence, an ideal tragedy. *The Pretenders*, on the other hand, is a chronicle-play, far more close-knit than Shakespeare's or Schiller's works in that kind, but, nevertheless, what Aristotle would call "episodic" in its construction. The weaving of the plot, however, is quite masterly, betokening an effort of invention and adjustment incomparably greater than that which went to the making of *The Vikings*. It was doubtless his training in the school of French intrigue that enabled Ibsen to depict with such astonishing vigour that master wire-puller, Bishop Nicholas. This form of technical dexterity he was afterwards to outgrow and bring into disrepute. But from *The Vikings* to *Pillars of Society* he practised, whenever he was writing primarily for the stage, the methods of the "well-made play"; and in everything but concentration, which the very nature of the subject excluded, *The Pretenders* is thoroughly "well-made."

With this play, though the Scandinavian criticism of 1864 seems to have been far from suspecting the fact, Ibsen took his place among the great dramatists of the world. In wealth of characterisation, complexity and nobility of emotion, and depth of spiritual insight, it stands high among the masterpieces of romantic drama. It would be hard to name a more vigorous character-projection than that of Bishop Nicholas, or any one dramatic invention more superbly inspired than the old man's death scene, with the triumphant completion of his

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perpetuum mobile. But even if the Bishop were entirely omitted, the play would not be *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. The characters of Håkon and Skule, and the struggle between them, would still make one of the greatest historic dramas in literature.

It has not been generally noticed, I think, that Ibsen found in Björnson's *King Sverre*, published in 1861, a study of Bishop Nicholas in his younger days. The play, as a whole, is a poor one, and does not appear in the collected edition of Björnson's works; but there is distinct merit in the drawing of the Bishop's character. Furthermore, it ought to be remembered that *The Pretenders* was not the first work, or even the first great work, of its class in Norwegian literature. In 1862, Björnson had published his splendid trilogy of *Sigurd Slembe*, which, though more fluid and uneven than *The Pretenders*, contains several passages of almost Shakespearean power. It was certainly greater than anything Ibsen had done up to that date. Ibsen reviewed it on its appearance, in terms of unmixed praise, yet, as one cannot but feel, rather overcautiously.

If anything could excuse the coolness of Norwegian criticism towards *The Pretenders*, it was the great and flagrant artistic blemish of the Ghost Scene in the last act. This outburst of prophetico-topical satire is a sheer excrescence on the play, indefensible, but, at the same time, fortunately negligible. It is, however, of interest as a symptom of Ibsen's mood in the last months before he left Norway, and also as one of the links in that chain which binds all his works together. Just as Skule's attempt to plagiarise Håkon's king's-thought points back-

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wards to Gunnar's moral lapse in taking advantage of the fraud on Hiördis, so the ironic rhymes of the Bagler-Bishop's ghost point forward to the lyric indignation and irony of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*.

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THE PRETENDERS
(1863)

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CHARACTERS

HÅKON HAKONSSON, *the King elected by the Birchlegs.*
INGA OF VARTEIG, *his mother.*
EARL SKULE.
LADY RAGNHILD, *his wife.*
SIGRID, *his sister.*
MARGRETE, *his daughter.*
GUTHORM INGESSON.
SIGURD RIBBUNG.
NICHOLAS ARNESSON, *Bishop of Oslo.*
DAGFINN THE PEASANT, *Håkon's marshal.*
IVAR BODDE, *his chaplain.*
VEGARD VAERADAL, *one of his guard.*
GREGORIUS JONSSON, *a nobleman.*
PAUL FLIDA, *a nobleman.*
INGEBORG, *Andres Skialdarband's wife.*
PETER, *her son, a young priest.*
SIRA VILIAM, *Bishop Nicholas's chaplain.*
MASTER SIGARD OF BRABANT, *a physician.*
JATGEIR SKALD, *an Icelander.*
BÅRD BRATTE, *a chieftain from the Trondhiem district.*
Populace and Citizens of Bergen, Oslo, and Nidaros.
Priests, Monks, and Nuns.
Guests, Guards, and Ladies.
Men-at-arms, etc. etc.

The action passes in the first half of the Thirteenth Century.

Pronunciation of Names: Håkon = Hoakoon ("oa" as in "board"); Skule = Skoolë; Margrete = Margraytë; Guthorm = Gootorm; Sigurd Ribbung = Sigoord Ribboong; Dagfinn ("a" as in "hard"); Ivar Bodde = Eevar Boddë; Vegard = Vaygard; Jonsson = Yoonson; Flida = Fleeda; Ingeborg = Ingheborg; Jatgeir = Yatgheir; Bård Bratte = Board Brattë. The name "Ingeborg" appears as "Ingebjörg" in Ibsen's text. The form I have substituted is equally current in Norway, and less troublesome to pronounce.

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THE PRETENDERS

HISTORIC PLAY IN FIVE ACTS

ACT FIRST

The churchyard of Christ Church, Bergen. At the back rises the church, the main portal of which faces the spectators. In front, on the left, stands HÅKON HÅKONSSON, *with* DAGFINN THE PEASANT, VEGARD OF VÆRADAL, IVAR BODDE, *and several other nobles and chieftains. Opposite to him stand* EARL SKULE, GREGORIUS JONSSON, PAUL FLIDA, *and others of the Earl's men. Further back on the same side are seen* SIGURD RIBBUNG *and his followers, and a little way from him* GUTHORM INGESSON, *with several chiefs. Men-at-arms line the approaches to the church; the common people fill the churchyard; many are perched in the trees and seated on the walls; all seem to await, in suspense, the occurrence of some event. All the church bells of the town are ringing far and near.*

EARL SKULE.

[*Softly and impatiently, to* GREGORIUS JONSSON.] Why tarry they so long in there?

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GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Hush! The psalm is beginning.

[*From inside the closed church doors, to the accompaniment of trumpets, is heard a* CHOIR OF MONKS AND NUNS *singing* Domine cœli, *etc. etc. While the singing is going on, the church door is opened from inside; in the porch* BISHOP NICHOLAS *is seen, surrounded by Priests and Monks.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Steps forward to the doorway and proclaims with uplifted crozier.*] Inga of Varteig is even now bearing the iron on behalf of Hâkon the Pretender.

[*The church door is closed again; the singing inside continues.*

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*In a low voice to the* EARL.] Call upon Holy King Olaf to protect the right.

EARL SKULE.

[*Hurriedly, with a deprecating gesture.*] Not now. Best not remind him of me.

IVAR BODDE.

[*Seizing* HÅKON *by the arm.*] Pray to the Lord thy God, Håkon Håkonsson.

HÅKON.

No need; I am sure of him.

[*The singing in the church grows louder; all uncover; many fall upon their knees and pray.*

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GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*To the* EARL.] A solemn hour for you and for many!

EARL SKULE.

[*Looking anxiously towards the church.*] A solemn hour for Norway.

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Near the* EARL.] Now is the glowing iron in her hands.

DAGFINN.

[*Beside* HÅKON.] They are coming down the nave.

IVAR BODDE.

Christ protect thy tender hands, Inga, mother of the King!

HÅKON.

Surely all my life shall reward her for this hour.

EARL SKULE.

[*Who has been listening intently, breaks out suddenly.*] Did she cry out? Has she let the iron fall?

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Goes up.*] I know not what it was.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Hark to the women weeping in the outer hall!

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THE CHOIR IN THE CHURCH.

[*Breaks forth in jubilation.*] Gloria in excelsis Deo!

[*The doors are thrown open.* INGA *comes forth, followed by Nuns, Priests, and Monks.*

INGA.

[*On the church steps.*] God has given judgment! Behold these hands; with them I bore the iron!

VOICES AMONGST THE MULTITUDE.

They are tender and white as before!

OTHER VOICES.

Fairer still!

THE WHOLE MULTITUDE.

He is Håkon's son! He is Sverre's[1] grandson:

HÅKON.

[*Embraces her.*] Thanks to thee, thanks to thee, blessed among women!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*In passing, to the* EARL.] 'Twas ill done to press for the ordeal.

EARL SKULE.

Nay, my lord Bishop, needs must we pray for God's voice in this matter.

HÅKON.

[*Deeply moved, holding* INGA *by the hand.*] It is done, then, that which my every fibre cried out against—that

[1] Pronounce *Sverré*.

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which has made my heart shrivel and writhe within me——

DAGFINN.

[*Turning towards the multitude.*] Ay, look upon this woman and bethink you, all that are gathered here! Who ever doubted her word, until certain folk required that it should be doubted.

PAUL FLIDA.

Doubt has whispered in every corner from the hour when Håkon the Pretender was borne, a little child, into King Inge's[1] hall.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

And last winter it swelled to a roar, and sounded forth over the land, both north and south; I trow every man can bear witness to that.

HÅKON.

I myself can best bear witness to it. Therefore have I yielded to the counsel of many faithful friends, and humbled myself as no other chosen king has done for many a day. I have proved my birth by the ordeal, proved my right, as the son of Håkon Sverresson, to succeed to the throne of Norway. I will not now question who fostered the doubt, and made it, as the Earl's kinsman says, swell into a roar; but this I know, that I have suffered bitterly under it. I have been chosen king from boyhood, but little kingly honour has been shown me, even where it seemed I might look for it most securely. I will but remind you of last Palm Sunday in Nidaros,[2] when I went up to the altar to make my offering, and the

[1] Pronounce *Inghē*. [2] The old name for Trondhiem.

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Archbishop turned away and made as though he saw me not, to escape greeting me as kings are wont to be greeted. Yet such slights I could easily have borne, had not open war been like to break loose in the land; that I must needs hinder.

DAGFINN.

It may be well for kings to hearken to counsels of prudence; but had my counsel been heard in this matter, it had not been with hot iron, but with cold steel that Håkon Håkonsson had called for judgment between himself and his foes.

HÅKON.

Curb yourself, Dagfinn; think what beseems the man who is to be foremost in the State.

EARL SKULE.

[*With a slight smile.*] 'Tis easy to call every one the King's foe who chimes not with the King's will. Methinks he is the King's worst foe who would counsel him against making good his right to the kingship.

HÅKON.

Who knows? Were my right alone in question, mayhap I had not paid so dear to prove it; but higher things are here at stake: my calling and my duty. Deep and warm is the faith within me—and I blush not to own it—that I alone am he who in these times can sway the land to its weal. Kingly birth begets kingly duty——

EARL SKULE.

There are others here who bear themselves the like fair witness.

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SIGURD RIBBUNG.

That do I, and with full as good ground. My grandfather was King Magnus Erlingsson——

HÅKON.

Ay, if your father, Erling Steinvæg, was indeed King Magnus's son; but most folks deny it, and in that matter none has yet faced the ordeal.

SIGURD RIBBUNG.

The Ribbungs chose me as king of their own free will, whereas 'twas by threats that Dagfinn the Peasant and other Birchlegs[1] gained for you the name of King.

HÅKON.

Ay, so ill had you dealt with Norway that the stock of Sverrë had to claim its right with threats.

GUTHORM INGESSON.

I am of the stock of Sverrë as much as you——

DAGFINN.

But not in the true male line.

[1] The "Birkebeiner" or Birchlegs were at this period a political faction. They were so called because, at the time of their first appearance, when they seem to have been little more than bandits, they eked out their scanty attire by making themselves leggings of birch-bark. Norway at this time swarmed with factions, such as the "Bagler" or Croziers (Latin, *baculus*), so called because Bishop Nicholas was their chief, the Ribbungs, the Slittungs, etc., devoted, for the most part, to one or other of the many Pretenders to the crown.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

You come on the spindle side, Guthorm.

GUTHORM INGESSON.

Yet this I know, that my father, Ingë Bårdsson, was lawfully chosen king of Norway.

HÅKON.

Because none knew that Sverrë's grandson was alive. From the day that became known, he held the kingdom in trust for me—not otherwise.

EARL SKULE.

That cannot truly be said; Ingë was king all his days, with all lawful power and without reserve. 'Tis true enough that Guthorm has but little claim, for he was born out of wedlock; but I am King Ingë's lawfully begotten brother, and the law is with me if I claim, and take, his full inheritance.

DAGFINN.

Ah, Sir Earl, of a truth you have taken full inheritance, not of your father's wealth alone, but of all the goods Håkon Sverresson left behind him.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Not all, good Dagfinn. Respect the truth;—King Håkon has kept a brooch and the golden ring he wears on his arm.

HÅKON.

Be that as it will; with God's help I shall win myself wealth again. And now, ye barons and thanes, ye

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churchmen and chieftains and men-at-arms, now it is time we held the folkmote, as has been agreed. I have sat with bound hands until this day; methinks no man will blame me for longing to have them loosed.

EARL SKULE.

There are others in like case, Håkon Håkonsson.

HÅKON.

[*His attention arrested.*] What mean you, Sir Earl?

EARL SKULE.

I mean that all we Pretenders have the same cause for longing. We have all alike been straitly bound, for none of us has known how far his right might reach.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The Church has been even as unstable as the kingdom; but now must we abide by the sainted King Olaf's law.

DAGFINN.

[*Half aloud.*] Fresh subtleties!

[HÅKON'S *men gather more closely together.*

HÅKON.

[*With forced calmness, advances a couple of paces towards the* EARL.] I would fain think I have not rightly taken your meaning. The ordeal has made good my birthright to the kingdom, and therefore, as I deem, the folkmote has nought to do but to confirm my election, made at the Örething[1] six years ago.

[1] A "thing," or assembly, held from time to time on the "öre" or foreshore at the mouth of the river Nid, at Trondhiem.

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SEVERAL OF THE EARL'S AND SIGURD'S MEN.

No, no! That we deny!

EARL SKULE.

'Twas with no such thought that we agreed to hold the folkmote here. The ordeal has not given you the kingdom; it has but proved your title to come forward to-day, along with the other Pretenders here present, and contend for the right you hold to be yours——

HÅKON.

[*Constraining himself to be calm.*] That means, in brief, that for six years I have unlawfully borne the name of King, and you, Sir Earl, have for six years unlawfully ruled the land as regent for me.

EARL SKULE.

In no wise. When my brother died, 'twas needful that some one should bear the kingly title. The Birchlegs, and most of all Dagfinn the Peasant, were active in your cause, and hastened your election through before we others could set forth our claims.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*To* HÅKON.] The Earl would say that that election gave you but the use of the kingly power, not the right to it.

EARL SKULE.

You have held all the marks of kingship; but Sigurd Ribbung and Guthorm Ingesson and I hold ourselves to

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the full as near inheritors as you; and now shall the law judge between us, and say whose shall be the inheritance for all time.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

In truth, Earl Skule reads the case aright.

EARL SKULE.

There has been talk more than once in these years of both ordeal and folkmote; but something has ever come between. And, Sir Håkon, if you deemed your right for ever fixed by the first election, how came you to accept the ordeal?

DAGFINN.

[*Exasperated.*] To your swords, King's men, let t h e m decide!

MANY OF THE KING'S MEN.

[*Rushing forward.*] Down with the King's enemies!

EARL SKULE.

[*Calls to his men.*] Slay none! Wound none! Only keep them off.

HÅKON.

[*Restraining his men.*] Up with your blades, all who have drawn them!—Up with your blades, I say! [*Calmly.*] You make things tenfold worse for me by such doings.

EARL SKULE.

Even so are men flying at each other's throats all the country over. You see now, Håkon Håkonsson; does

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not this show clearly what you have to do, if you care aught for the country's peace and the lives of men?

HÅKON.

[*After some reflection.*] Yes—I see it. [*Takes* INGA *by the hand and turns to one of those standing by him.*] Torkell, you were a trusty man in my father's guard; take this woman to your own abode and see you tend her well; she was very dear to Håkon Sverresson.—God bless you, my mother,—now I must gird me for the folkmote. [INGA *presses his hand, and goes with* TORKELL. HÅKON *is silent awhile, then steps forward and says with emphasis:*] The law shall decide, and it alone. Ye Birchlegs who, at the Örething, took me for your King, I free you from the oath ye sware to me. You, Dagfinn, are no longer my marshal; I will not appear with marshal or with guard,[1] with vassals or with henchmen. I am a poor man; all my inheritance is a brooch and this gold ring; —these are scant goods wherewith to reward so many good men's service. Now, ye other Pretenders, now we stand equal; I will have no advantage of you, save the right which I have from above—t h a t I neither can nor will share with any one.—Let the assembly-call be sounded, and then let God and the Holy King Olaf's law decide.

[*Goes out with his men to the left; blasts of trumpets and horns are heard in the distance.*

[1] The word *hird* is very difficult to render. It meant something between "court," "household," and "guard." I have never translated it "court," as that word seemed to convey an idea of peaceful civilisation foreign to the country and period; but I have used either "guard" or "household" as the context seemed to demand. *Hirdmand* I have generally rendered "man-at-arms." *Lendermand* I have represented by "baron"; *lagmand* and *sysselmand* by "thane"; and *stallare* by "marshal"—all mere rough approximations.

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GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*To the* EARL, *as the crowd is departing.*] Methought you seemed afraid during the ordeal, and now you look so glad and of good cheer.

EARL SKULE.

[*Well at ease.*] Marked you that he had Sverre's eyes as he spoke? Whether he or I be chosen king, the choice will be good.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Uneasily.*] But do not you give way. Think of all who stand or fall with your cause.

EARLE SKULE.

I stand now upon justice; I no longer fear to call upon Saint Olaf. [*Goes out to the left with his followers.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Hastening after* DAGFINN THE PEASANT.] All goes well, good Dagfinn, all goes well;—but keep the Earl far from the King when he is chosen;—see you keep them far apart! [*All go out to the left, behind the church.*

A hall in the Palace. In front, on the left, is a low window; on the right, the entrance-door; at the back, a larger door which leads into the King's Hall. By the window, a table; chairs and benches stand about.

LADY RAGNHILD *and* MARGRETE *enter by the smaller door;* SIGRID *follows immediately.*

LADY RAGNHILD.

In here?

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MARGRETE.

Ay, here it is darkest.

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Goes to the window.*] And here we can look down upon the mote-stead.

MARGRETE.

[*Looks out cautiously.*] Ay, there they are, all gathered behind the church. [*Turns, in tears.*] Yonder must now betide what will bring so much in its train.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Who will be master in this hall to-morrow?

MARGRETE.

Oh, hush! So heavy a day I had never thought to see.

LADY RAGNHILD.

It had to be; to rule in another's name was no full work for h i m.

MARGRETE.

Ay, it had to be; h e could never rest content with but the name of king.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Of whom speak you?

MARGRETE.

Of Håkon.

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LADY RAGNHILD.

I spoke of the Earl.

MARGRETE.

There breathe not nobler men than they two.

LADY RAGNHILD.

See you Sigurd Ribbung? With what a look of evil cunning he sits there—like a wolf in chains.

MARGRETE.

Ay, see!—He folds his hands before him on his sword-hilt and rests his chin upon them.

LADY RAGNHILD.

He bites his beard and laughs——

MARGRETE.

'Tis an evil laugh.

LADY RAGNHILD.

He knows that none will further his cause;—'tis that which makes him wroth. Who is yonder thane that speaks now?

MARGRETE.

That is Gunnar Grionbak.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Is he for the Earl?

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MARGRETE.

No, he is for the King——

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Looking at her.*] For whom say you?

MARGRETE.

For Håkon Håkonsson.

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Looks out; after a short pause.*] Where sits Guthorm Ingesson?—I see him not.

MARGRETE.

Behind his men, lowest of all there—in a long mantle.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Ay, there.

MARGRETE.

He looks as though he were ashamed——

LADY RAGNHILD.

That is for his mother's sake.

MARGRETE.

So looked not Håkon.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Who speaks now?

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MARGRETE.

[*Looking out.*] Tord Skolle, the thane of Ranafylke.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Is h e for the Earl?

MARGRETE.

No—for Håkon.

LADY RAGNHILD.

How motionless the Earl sits listening!

MARGRETE.

Håkon seems thoughtful—but strong none the less. [*With animation.*] If there came a traveller from afar, he could pick out those two amongst all the thousand others.

LADY RAGNHILD.

See, Margrete! Dagfinn the Peasant drags forth a gilded chair for Håkon——

MARGRETE.

Paul Flida places one like it behind the Earl——

LADY RAGNHILD.

Håkon's men seek to hinder it!

MARGRETE.

The Earl holds fast to the chair——!

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LADY RAGNHILD.

Håkon speaks wrathfully to him. [*Starts back, with a cry, from the window.*] Lord Jesus! Saw you his eyes —and his smile——! No, that was not the Earl!

MARGRETE.

[*Who has followed her in terror.*] 'Twas not Håkon either! Neither one nor the other!

SIGRID.

[*At the window.*] Oh pitiful! Oh pitiful!

MARGRETE.

Sigrid!

LADY RAGNHILD.

You here!

SIGRID.

Goes the path so low that leads up to the throne!

MARGRETE.

Oh, pray with us, that all be guided for the best.

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*White and horror-stricken, to* SIGRID.] Saw you him——? Saw you my husband——? His eyes and his smile—I should not have known him!

SIGRID.

Looked he like Sigurd Ribbung?

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LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Softly.*] Ay, he looked like Sigurd Ribbung.

SIGRID.

Laughed he like Sigurd?

LADY RAGNHILD.

Ay, ay!

SIGRID.

Then must we all pray.

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*With the force of despair.*] The Earl must be chosen King! 'Twill work ruin in his soul if he be not the first man in the land!

SIGRID.

[*More loudly.*] Then must we all pray!

LADY RAGNHILD.

Hist! What is that? [*At the window.*] What shouts! All the men have risen; all the banners and standards wave in the wind.

SIGRID.

[*Seizes her by the arm.*] Pray, woman! Pray for your husband!

LADY RAGNHILD.

Ay, Holy King Olaf, give him all the power in this land!

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SIGRID.

[*Wildly.*] None—none! Else is he lost!

LADY RAGNHILD.

He m u s t have the power. All the good in him will grow and blossom should he win it.—Look forth, Margrete! Listen! [*Starts back a step.*] All hands are lifted for an oath! [MARGRETE *listens at the window.*

LADY RAGNHILD.

God and St. Olaf, to whom do they swear?

SIGRID.

Pray!

[MARGRETE *listens, and with uplifted hand motions for silence.*

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*After a little while.*] Speak!

[*From the mote-stead is heard a loud blast of trumpets and horns.*

LADY RAGNHILD.

God and St. Olaf! To whom have they sworn?

[*A short pause.*

MARGRETE.

[*Turns her head and says:*] They have chosen Håkon Håkonsson king.

[*The music of the royal procession is heard, first in the distance and then nearer and nearer.* LADY RAGNHILD *clings weeping to* SIGRID, *who leads her quietly out on the right;* MARGRETE *remains im-*

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movable, leaning against the window-frame. The KING'S *attendants open the great doors, disclosing the interior of the Hall, which is gradually filled by the procession from the mote-stead.*

HÅKON.

[*In the doorway, turning to* IVAR BODDE.] Bring me a pen and wax and silk—I have parchment here. [*Advances exultantly to the table and spreads some rolls of parchment upon it.*] Margrete, now am I King!

MARGRETE.

Hail to my lord and King!

HÅKON.

I thank you. [*Looks at her and takes her hand.*] Forgive me; I forgot that it must wound you.

MARGRETE.

[*Drawing her hand away.*] It did not wound me;—of a surety you are born to be king.

HÅKON.

[*With animation.*] Ay, must not all men own it, who remember how marvellously God and the saints have shielded me from all harm? I was but a year old when the Birchlegs bore me over the mountains, in frost and storm, and through the very midst of those who sought my life. At Nidaros I came scatheless from the Baglers[1] when they burnt the town with so great a slaughter, while

[1] See note, p. 161.

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King Ingë himself barely saved his life by climbing on shipboard up the anchor-cable.

MARGRETE.

Your youth has been a hard one.

HÅKON.

[*Looking steadily at her.*] Methinks you might have made it easier.

MARGRETE.

I?

HÅKON.

You might have been so good a foster-sister to me, through all the years when we were growing up together.

MARGRETE.

But it fell out otherwise.

HÅKON.

Ay, it fell out otherwise;—we looked at each other, I from my corner, you from yours, but we seldom spoke—— [*Impatiently.*] What is keeping him? [IVAR BODDE *comes with the writing materials.*] Are you there? Give me the things!

[HÅKON *seats himself at the table and writes. A little while after,* EARL SKULE *comes in; then* DAGFINN THE PEASANT, BISHOP NICHOLAS *and* VEGARD VÆRADAL.

HÅKON.

[*Looks up and lays down his pen.*] Know you, Sir Earl, what I am writing here? [*The* EARL *approaches.*]

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This is to my mother; I thank her for all her love, and kiss her a thousand times—here in the letter you understand. She is to be sent eastward to Borgasyssel, there to live with all queenly honours.

EARL SKULE.

You will not keep her in the palace?

HÅKON.

She is too dear to me, Earl;—a king must have none about him whom he loves too well. A king must act with free hands; he must stand alone; he must neither be led nor lured. There is so much to be mended in Norway.

[*Goes on writing.*

VEGARD VÆRADAL.

[*Softly to* BISHOP NICHOLAS.] 'Tis by my counsel he deals thus with Inga, his mother.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I knew your hand in it at once.

VEGARD VÆRADAL.

But now one good turn deserves another.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Wait. I will keep my promise.

HÅKON.

[*Gives the parchment to* IVAR BODDE.] Fold it together and bear it to her yourself, with many loving greetings——

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IVAR BODDE.

[*Who has glanced at the parchment.*] My lord—you write here—"to-day"——!

HÅKON.

The wind is fair for a southward course.

DAGFINN.

[*Slowly.*] Bethink you, my lord King, that she has lain all night on the altar-steps in prayer and fasting.

IVAR BODDE.

And she may well be weary after the ordeal.

HÅKON.

True, true;—my good, kind mother——! [*Collects himself.*] Well, if she be too weary, let her wait until to-morrow.

IVAR BODDE.

It shall be as you will. [*Puts another parchment forward.*] But this other, my lord.

HÅKON.

That other?—Ivar Bodde, I cannot.

DAGFINN.

[*Points to the letter for* INGA.] Yet you could do t h a t.

IVAR BODDE.

All things sinful must be put away.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Who has drawn near in the meantime.*] Bind the Earl's hands, King Håkon.

HÅKON.

[*In a low voice.*] Think you t h a t is needful?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

At no cheaper rate can you buy peace in the land.

HÅKON.

Then I can do it! Give me the pen! [*Writes.*

EARL SKULE.

[*To the* BISHOP, *who crosses to the right.*] You have the King's ear, it would seem.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

For your behoof.

EARL SKULE.

Say you so?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Before nightfall you will thank me.

[*He moves away.*

HÅKON.

[*Hands the* EARL *the parchment.*] Read that, Earl Skule.

EARL SKULE.

[*Reads, looks in surprise at the* KING, *and says in a low voice.*] You break with Kanga the Young?

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HÅKON.

With Kanga whom I have loved more than all the world. From this day forward she must never more cross the King's path.

EARL SKULE.

This that you do is a great thing, Håkon. Mine own memory tells me what it must cost.

HÅKON.

Whoever is too dear to the King must away.—Tie up the letter. [*Gives it to* IVAR BODDE.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Bending over the chair.*] You have made a great stride towards the Earl's friendship, my lord King.

HÅKON.

[*Holds out his hand to him.*] I thank you, Bishop Nicholas; you counselled me for the best. Ask a grace of me, and I will grant it.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Will you?

HÅKON.

I promise it on my kingly faith.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Then make Vegard Væradal thane of Halogaland.

HÅKON.

Vegard? He is well-nigh the trustiest friend I have; I am loath to send him so far from me.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The King's friend must be royally rewarded. Bind the Earl's hands as I have counselled you, and you will be secure for ever and a day.

HÅKON.

[*Takes a sheet of parchment.*] Vegard shall bear rule in Halogaland. [*Writing.*] I hereby grant it under my royal hand. [*The* BISHOP *retires.*

EARL SKULE.

[*Approaches the table.*] What write you now?

HÅKON.

[*Hands him the sheet.*] Read.

EARL SKULE.

[*Reads, and looks steadily at the* KING.] Vegard Væradal? In Halogaland?

HÅKON.

The northern part stands vacant.

EARL SKULE.

Bethink you that Andres Skialdarband[1] has also a charge in the north. They two are bitter foes;—Andres Skialdarband is of my following——

HÅKON.

[*Smiling and rising.*] And Vegard Væradal of mine. Therefore they must e'en make friends again, the sooner

[1] Pronounce *Shaldarband.*

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the better. Henceforth there must be no enmity between the King's men and the Earl's.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ha!—this may go too far. [*Approaches, uneasy.*

EARL SKULE.

Your thoughts are wise and deep, Håkon.

HÅKON.

[*Warmly.*] Earl Skule, to-day have I taken the kingdom from you—let your daughter share it with me!

EARL SKULE.

My daughter!

MARGRETE.

Oh, God!

HÅKON.

Margrete, will you be my Queen?

[MARGRETE *is silent.*

HÅKON.

[*Takes her hand.*] Answer me.

MARGRETE.

[*Softly.*] I will gladly be your wife.

EARL SKULE.

[*Pressing* HÅKON'S *hand.*] Peace and friendship from my heart!

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HÅKON.

I thank you.

IVAR BODDE.

[*To* DAGFINN.] Heaven be praised; here is the dawn.

DAGFINN.

I almost believe it. Never before have I liked the Earl so well.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Behind him.*] Ever on your guard, good Dagfinn—ever on your guard.

IVAR BODDE.

[*To* VEGARD.] Now are you thane in Halogaland; here you have it under the King's hand.

[*Gives him the letter.*

VEGARD VÆRADAL.

I will thank the King for his favour another time.

[*About to go.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Stops him.*] Andres Skialdarband is an ugly neighbour; be not cowed by him.

VEGARD VÆRADAL.

No one has yet cowed Vegard Væradal. [*Goes.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Following.*] Be as rock and flint to Andres Skialdarband,—and, while I think on't, take my blessing with you.

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IVAR BODDE.

[*Who has been waiting behind the* KING *with the parchments in his hand.*] Here are the letters, my lord.

HÅKON.

Good; give them to the Earl.

IVAR BODDE.

To the Earl? Will you not seal them?

HÅKON.

The Earl is wont to do that;—he holds the seal.

IVAR BODDE.

[*Softly.*] Ay, hitherto — while he was regent — but n o w !

HÅKON.

Now as before;—the Earl holds the seal.

[*Moves away.*

EARL SKULE.

Give me the letters, Ivar Bodde.

[*Goes to the table with them, takes out the Great Seal which he wears under his girdle, and seals the letters during the following.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Muttering.*] Håkon Håkonsson is King—and the Earl holds the royal seal;—I like that—I like that.

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HÅKON.

What says my lord Bishop?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I say that God and St. Olaf watch over their holy church. [*Goes into the King's Hall.*

HÅKON.

[*Approaching* MARGRETE.] A wise queen can do great things in the land: I chose you fearlessly, for I know you are wise.

MARGRETE.

Only t h a t ?

HÅKON.

What mean you?

MARGRETE.

Nothing, my lord, nothing.

HÅKON.

And you will bear me no grudge if for my sake you have had to forgo fair hopes?

MARGRETE.

I have forgone no fair hopes for your sake.

HÅKON.

And you will stand ever near me, and give me good counsel?

MARGRETE.

I would fain stand near to you.

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HÅKON.

And give me good counsel. I thank you for that; a woman's counsel profits every man, and henceforth I have none but you—my mother I had to send away——

MARGRETE.

Ay, she was too dear to you——

HÅKON.

And I am King. Farewell then, Margrete! You are so young yet; but next summer shall our bridal be,—and from that hour I swear to keep you by my side in all seemly faith and honour.

MARGRETE.

[*Smiles sadly.*] Ay, 'twill be long, I know, ere you send me away.

HÅKON.

[*Brightly.*] Send you away? That will I never do.

MARGRETE.

[*With tears in her eyes.*] No, that Håkon does only to those who are too dear to him.

[*She goes towards the entrance door.* HÅKON *gazes thoughtfully after her.*

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*From the right.*] The King and the Earl tarry here so long! My fears are killing me;—Margrete, what has the King said and done?

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MARGRETE.

Oh, much, much! Last of all, he chose a thane and a Queen.

LADY RAGNHILD.

You, Margrete?

MARGRETE.

[*Throws her arms round her mother's neck.*] Yes!

LADY RAGNHILD.

You are to be Queen!

MARGRETE.

Queen only;—but I think I am glad even of that.

[*She and her mother go out to the right.*

EARL SKULE.

[*To* IVAR BODDE.] Here are our letters; bear them to the King's mother and to Kanga.

[IVAR BODDE *bows and goes.*

DAGFINN.

[*In the doorway of the hall.*] The Archbishop of Nidaros craves leave to offer King Håkon Håkonsson his homage.

HÅKON.

[*Draws a deep breath.*] At last, then, I am King of Norway.

EARL SKULE.

[*Places the Great Seal in his girdle.*] But *I* rule the realm.

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ACT SECOND

Banquet Hall in the Palace at Bergen. A large bay-window in the middle of the back wall, along which there is a daïs with seats for the ladies. Against the left wall stands the throne, raised some steps above the floor; in the centre of the opposite wall is the great entrance door. Banners, standards, shields and weapons, with many-coloured draperies, hang from the wall-timbers and from the carven rafters. Around the hall stand drinking-tables, with flagons, horns, and beakers.

KING HÅKON *sits upon the daïs, with* MARGRETE, SIGRID, LADY RAGNHILD, *and many noble ladies.* IVAR BODDE *stands behind the* King's *chair. Round the drinking-tables are seated the King's and the Earl's men, with guests. At the foremost table on the right sit, among others,* DAGFINN THE PEASANT, GREGORIUS JONSSON, *and* PAUL FLIDA. EARL SKULE *and* BISHOP NICHOLAS *are playing chess at a table on the left. The* Earl's *house-folk go to and fro, bearing cans of liquor. From an adjoining room, music is heard during the following scene.*

DAGFINN.

The fifth day now wears on, yet the henchmen are none the less nimble at setting forth the brimming flagons.

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PAUL FLIDA.

It was never the Earl's wont to stint his guests.

DAGFINN.

No, so it would seem. So royal a bridal-feast was never seen in Norway before.

PAUL FLIDA.

Earl Skule has never before given a daughter in marriage.

DAGFINN.

True, true; the Earl is a mighty man.

A MAN-AT-ARMS.

He holds a third part of the kingdom. That is more than any earl has held heretofore.

PAUL FLIDA.

But the King's part is larger.

DAGFINN.

We talk not of that here; we are friends now, and fully at one. [*Drinks to* PAUL.] So let King be King and Earl be Earl.

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Laughs.*] 'Tis easy to hear that you are a King's man.

DAGFINN.

That should the Earl's men also be.

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PAUL FLIDA.

Never. We have sworn fealty to the Earl, not to the King.

DAGFINN.

That may yet have to be done.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*To the* EARL, *under cover of the game.*] Hear you what Dagfinn the Peasant says?

EARL SKULE.

[*Without looking up.*] I hear.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Looking steadily at* DAGFINN.] Has the King thoughts of that?

DAGFINN.

Nay, nay,—let be;—no wrangling to-day.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The King would force your men to swear him fealty, Earl.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Louder.*] Has the King thoughts of that, I ask?

DAGFINN.

I will not answer. Let us drink to peace and friendship between the King and the Earl. The ale is good.

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PAUL FLIDA.

It has had time enough to mellow.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Three times has the Earl prepared the bridal—three times the King promised to come—three times he came not.

DAGFINN.

Blame the Earl for t h a t : he gave us plenty to do in Viken.

PAUL FLIDA.

'Tis said Sigurd Ribbung gave you still more to do in Vermeland.

DAGFINN.

[*Flaring up.*] Ay, and who was it that let Sigurd Ribbung slip through their fingers?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Sigurd Ribbung fled from us at Nidaros, that all men know.

DAGFINN.

But no man knows that you did aught to hinder him.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*To the* EARL, *who is pondering on a move.*] Hear you, Earl? It was you who let Sigurd Ribbung escape.

EARL SKULE.

[*Makes a move.*] That is an old story.

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GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Have you not heard, then, of the Icelander Andres Torsteinsson, Sigurd Ribbung's friend——

DAGFINN.

Ay; when Sigurd had escaped, you hanged the Icelander—that I know.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Makes a move and says laughingly to the* EARL.] I take the pawn, Sir Earl.[1]

EARL SKULE.

[*Aloud.*] Take him; a pawn is of small account.
[*Makes a move.*

DAGFINN.

Ay; that the Icelander found to his cost, when Sigurd Ribbung escaped to Vermeland.

[*Suppressed laughter amongst the King's men; the conversation is continued in a low tone; presently a man comes in and whispers to* GREGORIUS JONSSON.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Then I move here, and you have lost.

EARL SKULE.

So it would seem.

[1] Bishop Nicholas's speech, "Nu slår jeg bonden, herre jarl," means literally, "Now I strike (or slay) the peasant"; the pawn being called in Norwegian "bonde," peasant, as in German "Bauer." Thus in this speech and the next the Bishop and the Earl are girding at Dagfinn the Peasant. [Our own word "pawn" comes from the Spanish *peon*=a foot-soldier or day-labourer.]

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Leaning back in his chair.*] You did not guard the king well at the last.

EARL SKULE.

[*Strews the pieces topsy-turvy and rises.*] I have long been weary of guarding kings.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Approaches and says in a low tone.*] Sir Earl, Jostein [1] Tamb sends word that the ship now lies ready for sea.

EARL SKULE.

[*Softly.*] Good. [*Takes out a sealed parchment.*] Here is the letter.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Shaking his head.*] Earl, Earl,—is t h i s well bethought?

EARL SKULE.

What?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

It bears the King's seal.

EARL SKULE.

I am acting for the King's good.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Then let the King himself reject the offer.

[1] Pronounce *Yostein.*

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EARL SKULE.

That he will not, if he has his own way. His whole heart is bent on cowing the Ribbungs, therefore he is fain to secure himself on other sides.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Your way may be wise,—but it is dangerous.

EARL SKULE.

Leave that to me. Take the letter, and bid Jostein sail forthwith.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

It shall be as you command.

[*Goes out to the right, and presently comes in again.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*To the* EARL.] You have much to see to, it would seem.

EARL SKULE.

But small thanks for it.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The King has risen.

[HÅKON *comes down; all the men rise from the tables.*

HÅKON

[*To the* BISHOP.] We are rejoiced to see you bear up so bravely and well through all these days of merriment.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

There comes a flicker now and again, my lord King; but 'twill scarce last long. I have lain sick all the winter through.

HÅKON.

Ay, ay,—you have lived a strong life, rich in deeds of fame.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Shakes his head.*] Ah, 'tis little enough I have done, and I have much still left to do. If I but knew whether I should have time for it all!

HÅKON.

The living must take up the tasks of those who go before, honoured lord; we all have the welfare of the land at heart. [*Turns to the* EARL.] I marvel much at one thing: that neither of our thanes from Halogaland has come to the bridal.

EARL SKULE.

True; I doubted not that Andres Skialdarband would be here.

HÅKON.

[*Smiling.*] And Vegard Væradal too.

EARL SKULE.

Ay, Vegard too.

HÅKON.

[*In jest.*] And I trust you would now have received my old friend better than you did seven years ago on

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Oslo wharf, when you stabbed him in the cheek so that the blade cut its way out.

EARL SKULE.

[*With a forced laugh.*] Ay, the time that Gunnulf, your mother's brother, cut off the right hand of Sira Eiliv, my best friend and counsellor.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Merrily.*] And when Dagfinn the Peasant and the men-at-arms set a strong night-watch on the King's ship, saying that the King was unsafe in the Earl's ward?

HÅKON.

[*Seriously.*] Those days are old and forgotten.

DAGFINN.

[*Approaching.*] Now may we sound the call to the weapon-sports on the green, if so please you, my lord.

HÅKON.

Good. To-day will we give up to nought but merriment; to-morrow we must turn our thoughts again to the Ribbungs and the Earl of Orkney.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, he denies to pay tribute, is it not so?

HÅKON.

Were I once well rid of the Ribbungs, I would myself fare westward.

[HÅKON *goes towards the daïs, gives his hand to* MARGRETE, *and leads her out to the right; the others gradually follow.*

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*To* IVAR BODDE.] Who is the man called Jostein Tamb?

IVAR BODDE.

There is a trader from Orkney who bears that name.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

From Orkney? So, so! And now he sails home again?

IVAR BODDE.

So I think.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Softly.*] With a precious freight, Ivar Bodde.

IVAR BODDE.

Corn and raiment, most like.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And a letter from Earl Skule.

IVAR BODDE.

[*Starting.*] To whom?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I know not; it bore the King's seal——

IVAR BODDE.

[*Seizes him by the arm.*] Lord Bishop,—is it as you say?

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Hush! Do not mix me up in the matter. [*Retires.*

IVAR BODDE.

Then must I straightway—— Dagfinn the Peasant! Dagfinn! Dagfinn——!

[*Pushes through the crowd towards the door.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*In a tone of commiseration, to* GREGORIUS JONSSON.] Never a day but one or another must suffer in goods or freedom.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Who is it now?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

A poor trader,—Jostein Tamb methinks they called him.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Jostein——?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Dagfinn the Peasant would forbid him to set sail.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Dagfinn would forbid him, say you?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He went even now.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Pardon, my lord; I must make speed——

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, do even so, my dear lord;—Dagfinn the Peasant is so hasty.

[GREGORIUS JONSSON *hastens out to the right along with the remainder of the company; only* EARL SKULE *and* BISHOP NICHOLAS *are left behind in the hall.*

EARL SKULE.

[*Walks up and down in deep thought; he seems suddenly to awaken; looks round him, and says:*] How still it has become here of a sudden!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The King has gone.

EARL SKULE.

And every one has followed him.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

All, save us.

EARL SKULE.

It is a great thing to be King.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Tentatively.*] Are you fain to try it, Earl?

EARL SKULE.

[*With a serious smile.*] I have tried it; every night that brings me sleep makes me King of Norway.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Dreams forbode.

EARL SKULE.

Ay, and tempt.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Not you, surely. In bygone days, that I could understand—but now, when you hold a third part of the kingdom, rule as the first man in the land, and are the Queen's father——

EARL SKULE.

Now most of all—now most of all.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Hide nothing! Confess; for verily I can see a great pain is gnawing you.

EARL SKULE.

Now most of all, I say. T h i s is the great curse that lies upon my whole life: to stand so near to the highest,—with an abyss between. One leap, and on the other side are the kingship, and the purple robe, the throne, the might, and all! I have it daily before my eyes—but can never reach it.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

True, Earl, true.

EARL SKULE.

When they made Guthorm Sigurdsson king, I was in the full strength of my youth; it was as though a

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voice cried aloud within me: Away with the child,—I am the man, the strong man!—But Guthorm was the king's son; there yawned an abyss between me and the throne.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And you dared not venture——

EARL SKULE.

Then Erling Steinvæg was chosen by the Slittungs. The voice cried within me again: Skule is a greater chieftain than Erling Steinvæg! But I must needs have broken with the Birchlegs,—t h a t was the abyss that time.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And Erling became king of the Slittungs, and after of the Ribbungs, and still you waited!

EARL SKULE.

I waited for Guthorm to die.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And Guthorm died, and Inge Bårdsson, your brother, became king.

EARL SKULE.

Then I waited for my brother's death. He was sickly from the first; every morning, when we met at holy mass, I would cast stolen glances to see whether his sickness increased. Every twitch of pain that crossed his face was as a puff of wind in my sails, and bore me nearer to the throne. Every sigh he breathed

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in his agony sounded to me like an echoing trumpet-blast, like a herald from afar, proclaiming that the throne should soon be mine. Thus I tore up by the roots every thought of brotherly kindness; and Inge died, and Håkon came—and the Birchlegs made h i m king.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And you waited.

EARL SKULE.

Methought help must come from above. I felt the kingly strength within me, and I was growing old; every day that passed was a day taken from my life-work. Each evening I thought: To-morrow will come the miracle that shall strike him down and set me in the empty seat.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Small was then Håkon's power; he was no more than a child; it wanted but a single step from you—yet you took it not.

EARL SKULE.

That step was hard to take; it would have parted me from my kindred and from all my friends.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, t h e r e is the rub, Earl Skule,—t h a t is the curse which has lain upon your life. You would fain know every way open at need,—you dare not break all your bridges and keep only one, defend it alone, and on it conquer or fall. You lay snares for your foe, you set traps for his feet, and hang sharp swords over his head;

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you strew poison in every dish, and you spread a hundred nets for him; but when he walks into your toils you dare not draw the string; if he stretch out his hand for the poison, you think it safer he should fall by the sword; if he is like to be caught in the morning, you hold it wiser to wait till eventide.

EARL SKULE.

[*Looking earnestly at him.*] And what would y o u do, my lord Bishop?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Speak not of me; my work is to build up thrones in this land, not to sit on them and rule.

EARL SKULE.

[*After a short pause.*] Answer me o n e thing, my honoured lord, and answer me truly. How comes it that Håkon can follow the straight path so unflinchingly? He is no wiser, no bolder than I.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Who does the greatest work in this world?

EARL SKULE.

The greatest man.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

But who is the greatest man?

EARL SKULE.

The bravest.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

So says the warrior. A priest would say: the man of greatest faith,—a philosopher: the most learned. But it is none of these, Earl Skule. The most fortunate man[1] is the greatest man. It is the most fortunate man that does the greatest deeds—he whom the cravings of his time seize like a passion, begetting thoughts he himself cannot fathom, and pointing to paths which lead he knows not whither, but which he follows and must follow till he hears the people shout for joy, and, looking around him with wondering eyes, finds that he has done a mighty deed.

EARL SKULE.

Ay, there is that unswerving confidence in Håkon.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

It is that which the Romans called *ingenium*.—Truly I am not strong in Latin; but 'twas called *ingenium*.

EARL SKULE.

[*Thoughtfully at first, afterwards in increasing excitement.*] Is Håkon made of other clay than mine? The fortunate man?—Ay, does not everything thrive with him? Does not everything shape itself for the best, when he is concerned? Even the peasants note it; they say the trees bear fruit twice, and the fowls hatch out two broods every summer, whilst Håkon is king. Vermeland, where he burned and harried, stands smiling

[1] *Den lykkeligste mand.* The word *lykke* means not only luck or fortune, but happiness. To render *lykkeligste* completely, we should require a word in which the ideas "fortunate" and "happy" should be blent.

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with its houses built afresh, and its corn-lands bending heavy-eared before the breeze. 'Tis as though blood and ashes fertilised the land where Håkon's armies pass; 'tis as though the Lord clothed with double verdure what Håkon has trampled down; 'tis as though the holy powers made haste to blot out all evil in his track. And how easy has been his path to the throne! He needed that Inge should die early, and Inge died: his youth needed to be watched and warded, and his men kept watch and ward around him; he needed the ordeal, and his mother arose and bore the iron for him.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*With an involuntary outburst.*] But we—we two——!

EARL SKULE.

We?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

You, I would say—what of you?

EARL SKULE.

The right is Håkon's, Bishop.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The right is his, for he is the fortunate one; 'tis even the summit of fortune, to have the right. But by what right has Håkon the right, and not you?

EARL SKULE.

[*After a short pause.*] There are things I pray God to save me from thinking upon.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Saw you never an old picture in Christ's Church at Nidaros? It shows the Deluge rising and rising over all the hills, so that there is but one single peak left above the waters. Up it clambers a whole household, father and mother and son and son's wife and children;—and the son is hurling the father back into the flood to gain better footing; and he will cast his mother down and his wife and all his children, to win to the top himself;—for up there he sees a handsbreadth of ground, where he may keep life in him for an hour.—That, Earl, that is the saga of wisdom, and the saga of every wise man.

EARL SKULE.

But the right!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The son h a d the right. He had strength, and the craving for life;—fulfil your cravings and use your strength: so much right has every man.

EARL SKULE.

Ay, for that which is good.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Words, empty words! There is neither good nor evil, up nor down, high nor low. You must forget such words, else will you never take the last stride, never leap the abyss. [*In a subdued voice and insistently.*] You must not hate a party or a cause for that the party or the cause would have t h i s and not t h a t; but you must hate every man of a party for that he is against you, and you must hate all who

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gather round a cause, for that the cause clashes with your will. Whatever is helpful to you, is good—whatever lays stumbling-blocks in your path is evil.

EARL SKULE.

[*Gazing thoughtfully before him.*] What has that throne not cost me, which yet I have not reached! And what has it cost Håkon, who now sits in it so securely! I was young, and I forswore my sweet secret love to ally myself with a powerful house. I prayed to the saints that I might be blessed with a son—I got only daughters.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Håkon will have sons, Earl—mark that!

EARL SKULE.

[*Crossing to the window on the right.*] Ay—all things fall out to Håkon's wish.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And you—will you suffer yourself to be outlawed from happiness all your life through? Are you blind? See you not that it is a stronger might than the Birchlegs that stands at Håkon's back, and furthers all his life-work? He has help from above, from—from those that are against you—from those that have been your enemies, even from your birth! And will you bow before these your enemies? Rouse you, man; straighten your back! To what end got you your masterful soul? Bethink you that the first great deed in all the world was done by one who rose against a mighty realm!

EARL SKULE.

Who?

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The angel who rose against the light!

EARL SKULE.

And was hurled into the bottomless pit——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Wildly.*] And founded there a kingdom, and made himself a king, a mighty king—mightier than any of the ten thousand—earls up yonder!

[*Sinks down upon a bench beside the table.*

EARL SKULE.

[*Looks long at him.*] Bishop Nicholas, are you something more or something less than a man?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Smiling.*] I am in the state of innocence: I know not good from evil.

EARL SKULE.

[*Half to himself.*] Why did they send me into the world, if they meant not to order it better for me? Håkon has so firm and unswerving a faith in himself—all his men have so firm and unswerving a faith in him——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Let it not be seen that y o u have no such faith in yourself! Speak as though you had it, swear great oaths that you have it—and all will believe you.

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EARL SKULE.

Had I a son! Had I but a son, to take all the great heritage after me!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Eagerly.*] Earl—if you had a son?

EARL SKULE

I have none.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Håkon will have sons.

EARL SKULE.

[*Wringing his hands.*] And is king-born!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Rising.*] Earl—if he were not so?

EARL SKULE.

Has he not proved it? The ordeal——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And if he were not—in spite of the ordeal?

EARL SKULE.

Do you say that God lied in the issue of the ordeal?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

What was it Inga of Varteig called upon God to witness?

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EARL SKULE.

That the child she bore in the eastland, in Borgasysel, was the son of Håkon Sverresson.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Nods, looks round, and says softly.*] And if King Håkon were not that child?

EARL SKULE.

[*Starts a step backwards.*] Great God——! [*Controls himself.*] It is beyond belief.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Hearken to me, Earl Skule. I have lived seventy years and six; it begins to go sharply downhill with me now, and I dare not take this secret with me over yonder——

EARL SKULE.

Speak, speak! Is he not the son of Håkon Sverresson?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Hear me. It was known to none that Inga was with child. Håkon Sverresson was lately dead, and doubtless she feared Inge Bårdsson, who was then king, and you, and—well, and the Baglers[1] too mayhap. She was brought to bed secretly in the house of Trond the Priest, in Heggen parish, and after nine days she departed homewards; but the child remained a whole year with the priest, she not daring to look to it, and none knowing that it breathed save Trond and his two sons.

[1] See note, p. 161.

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EARL SKULE.

Ay, ay—and then?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

When the child was a year old, it could scarce be kept hidden longer. So Inga made the matter known to Erlend of Huseby—an old Birchleg of Sverre's days, as you know.

EARL SKULE.

Well?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He and other chiefs from the Uplands took the child, bore it over the mountains in midwinter, and brought it to the King, who was then at Nidaros.

EARL SKULE.

And yet you can say that——?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Needless to say, 'twas a dangerous task for a humble priest to rear a king's child. So soon as the child was born, he laid the matter before one of his superiors in the church, and prayed for his counsel. This his superior bade Trond send the true king's son with secrecy to a place of safety, and give Inga another, if she or the Birchlegs should afterwards ask for her child.

EARL SKULE.

[*Indignantly.*] And who was the hound that gave that counsel?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

It was I.

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EARL SKULE.

You? Ay, you have ever hated the race of Sverre.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I deemed it not safe for the King's son to fall into your hands.

EARL SKULE.

But the priest——?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Promised to do as I bade.

EARL SKULE.

[*Seizing him by the arm.*] And Håkon is the other child?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

If the priest kept his promise.

EARL SKULE.

If he kept it?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Trond the Priest departed the land the same winter that the child was brought to King Inge. He journeyed to Thomas Becket's grave, and afterwards abode in England till his death.

EARL SKULE.

He departed the land, say you? Then must he have changed the children and dreaded the vengeance of the Birchlegs.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Or he did not change the children, and dreaded my vengeance.

EARL SKULE.

Which surmise hold you for the truth?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Either may well be true.

EARL SKULE.

But the priest's sons of whom you spoke?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

They went with the crusaders to the Holy Land.

EARL SKULE.

And there have since been no tidings of them?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, tidings there have been.

EARL SKULE.

Where are they?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

They were drowned in the Greek Sea on the journey forth.

EARL SKULE.

And Inga——?

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Knows nought, either of the priest's confession or of my counsel.

EARL SKULE.

Her child was but nine days old when she left it, you said?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, and the child she next saw was over a year——

EARL SKULE.

Then no living creature can here bring light! [*Paces rapidly to and fro.*] Almighty God, can this be true? Håkon—the King—he who holds sway over all this land, not born of royal blood!—And why should it not be like enough? Has not all fortune miraculously followed him?—Why not this also, to be taken as a child from a poor cottar's hut and laid in a king's cradle——?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Whilst the whole people believes that he is the king's son——

EARL SKULE.

Whilst h e h i m s e l f believes it, Bishop—t h a t is the heart of his fortune, t h a t is the girdle of strength! [*Goes to the window.*] See how bravely he sits his horse! None rides as he does. His eyes are filled with laughing, dancing sunshine; he looks forth into the day as though he knew himself created to go forward, ever forward. [*Turns towards the* BISHOP.] I am a king's arm, mayhap a king's brain as well; but he is the whole King.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Yet no king after all, mayhap.

EARL SKULE.

Mayhap no king after all.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Lays his hand on the Earl's shoulder.*] Hearken to me, Earl Skule——

EARL SKULE.

[*Still looking out.*] There sits the Queen. Håkon speaks gently to her; she turns red and white with joy. He took her to wife because it was wise to choose the daughter of the mightiest man in the land. There was then no thought of love for her in his heart;—but it will come; Håkon has fortune with him. She will shed light over his life—— [*Stops, and cries out in wonder.*] What is t h i s ?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

What?

EARL SKULE.

Dagfinn the Peasant bursts violently through the crowd. Now he is giving the King some tidings.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Looking out from behind the* EARL.] Håkon seems angered—does he not? He clenches his fist——

EARL SKULE.

He looks hitherward—what can it be? [*About to go.*

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Holding him back.*] Hearken to me, Earl Skule—there may yet be one means of winning assurance as to Håkon's right.

EARL SKULE.

One means, you say?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Trond the Priest ere he died, wrote a letter telling his whole tale, and took the sacrament in witness of its truth.

EARL SKULE.

And that letter—for God's pity's sake—where is it?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

You must know that—— [*Looks towards the door.*] Hush!—here comes the King.

EARL SKULE.

The letter, Bishop—the letter!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The King is here.

[HÅKON *enters, followed by his* Guard *and many guests. Immediately afterwards,* MARGRETE *appears; she seems anxious and alarmed, and is about to rush up to the* King, *when she is restrained by* LADY RAGNHILD, *who, with other ladies, has followed her.* SIGRID *stands somewhat apart, towards the back. The* EARL'S *men appear uneasy, and gather in a group on the right, where* SKULE *is standing, but some way behind him.*

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HÅKON.

[*In strong but repressed excitement.*] Earl Skule, who is king in this land?

EARL SKULE.

Who is king?

HÅKON.

That was my question. I bear the kingly title, but who holds the kingly might?

EARL SKULE.

The kingly might should dwell with him who has the kingly right.

HÅKON.

So should it be; but is it so?

EARL SKULE.

Do you summon me to judgment?

HÅKON.

That I do; for that right I have toward every man in the land.

EARL SKULE.

I fear not to answer for my dealings.

HÅKON.

Well for us all if you can. [*Mounts a step of throne-daïs, and leans upon one arm of the throne.*] Here stand I as your king, and ask: Know you that Jon, Earl of Orkney, has risen against me?

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EARL SKULE.

Yes.

HÅKON.

That he denies to pay me tribute?

EARL SKULE.

Yes.

HÅKON.

And is it true that you, Sir Earl, have this day sent him a letter?

EARL SKULE.

Who says so?

IVAR BODDE.

That do I.

DAGFINN.

Jostein Tamb dared not deny to carry it, since it bore the King's seal.

HÅKON.

You write to the King's foes under the King's seal, although the King knows nought of what is written?

EARL SKULE.

So have I done for many a year, with your good will.

HÅKON.

Ay, in the days of your regency.

EARL SKULE.

Never have you had aught but good thereby. Earl Jon wrote to me praying that I would mediate on his

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behalf; he offered peace, but on terms dishonourable to the King. The war in Vermeland has weighed much upon your mind; had this matter been left to you, Earl Jon had come too lightly off. I can deal better with him.

HÅKON.

'Twas our will to deal with him ourself.—And what answer made you?

EARL SKULE.

Read my letter.

HÅKON.

Give it me!

EARL SKULE.

I deemed you had it.

DAGFINN.

Nay, you know better than that. Gregorius Jonsson was too swift of foot; when we came on board, the letter was gone.

EARL SKULE.

[*Turns to* GREGORIUS JONSSON.] Sir Baron, give the King the letter.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Coming close to him, uneasily.*] Hearken, Earl——!

EARL SKULE.

What now?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Softly.*] Bethink you, there were sharp words in it concerning the King.

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EARL SKULE.

My words I shall answer for. The letter!

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

I have it not.

EARL SKULE.

You have it not?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Dagfinn the Peasant was at our heels. I snatched the letter from Jostein Tamb, tied a stone to it——

EARL SKULE.

Well?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

It lies at the bottom of the fiord.

EARL SKULE.

You have done ill—ill.

HÅKON.

I await the letter, Sir Earl.

EARL SKULE.

I cannot give it you.

HÅKON.

You c a n n o t!

EARL SKULE.

[*Advancing a step towards the* KING.] My pride brooks not to be put to shifts, as you and your men would call it——

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HÅKON.

[*Controlling his rising wrath.*] And so——?

EARL SKULE.

In one word—I will not give it you!

HÅKON.

Then you defy me?

EARL SKULE.

Since so it must be—yes, I defy you.

IVAR BODDE.

[*Forcibly.*] Now, my lord King, I scarce think you or any man can now need further proof!

DAGFINN.

Nay, now I think we know the Earl's mind.

HÅKON.

[*Coldly, to the* EARL.] You will hand the Great Seal to Ivar Bodde.

MARGRETE.

[*Rushes with clasped hands towards the daïs, where the* KING *is standing.*] Håkon be a kind and gracious husband to me!

[HÅKON *makes an imperative gesture towards her; she hides her face in her veil, and goes up towards her mother again.*

EARL SKULE.

[*To* IVAR BODDE.] Here is the Great Seal.

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IVAR BODDE.

This was to be the last evening of the feast. It has ended in a heavy sorrow for the King; but sooner or later it needs must come, and methinks every true man must rejoice that it h a s come.

EARL SKULE.

And I think every true man must feel bitter wrath to see a priest thus make mischief between us Birchlegs; —ay, Birchlegs, I say; for I am every whit as good a Birchleg as the King or any of his men. I am of the same stock, the stock of Sverre, the kingly stock—but you, Priest, you have built up a wall of distrust around the King, and shut me out from him; that has been your task this many a year.

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Enraged, to the bystanders.*] Earl's men! Shall we abide this longer?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Steps forward.*] No, we can and will no more abide it. 'Tis time to say it plainly—none of the Earl's men can serve the King in full trust and love, so long as Ivar Bodde comes and goes in the palace, and makes bad blood between us.

PAUL FLIDA.

Priest! I bid you look to life and limb, wheresoever I meet you—in the field, on shipboard, or in any unconsecrated house.

MANY EARL'S MEN.

I too! I too! You are an outlaw to us!

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IVAR BODDE.

God forbid that I should stand between the King and so many mighty chieftains.—Håkon, my gracious lord, my soul bears me witness that I have served you in all faithfulness. True, I have warned you against the Earl; but if I have ever done him wrong, I pray God forgive me. Now have I no more to do in the palace; here is your Seal; take it into your own hands; there it should have rested long ago.

HÅKON.

[*Who has come down from the dais.*] You shall remain!

IVAR BODDE.

I cannot. If I did, my conscience would gnaw and rend me night and day. Greater evil can no man do in these times than to hold the King and the Earl asunder.

HÅKON.

Ivar Bodde, I command you to remain!

IVAR BODDE.

If the Holy King Olaf should rise from his silver shrine to bid me stay, still I needs must go. [*Places the Seal in the* KING'S *hand.*] Farewell, my noble master! God bless and prosper you in all your work!

[*Goes out through the crowd, to the right.*

HÅKON.

[*Gloomily, to the* EARL *and his men.*] There have I lost a trusty friend for your sakes; what requital can you offer to make good that loss?

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EARL SKULE.

I offer myself and all my friends.

HÅKON.

I almost fear 'twill not suffice. Now must I gather round me all the men I can fully trust. Dagfinn the Peasant, let a messenger set out forthwith for Halogaland; Vegard Væradal must be recalled.

DAGFINN.

[*Who has been standing somewhat towards the back, in conversation with a man in travelling dress who has entered the hall, approaches and says with emotion:*] Vegard cannot come, my lord.

HÅKON.

How know you that?

DAGFINN.

I have even now had tidings of him.

HÅKON.

What tidings?

DAGFINN.

That Vegard Væradal is slain.

MANY VOICES.

Slain!

HÅKON.

Who slew him?

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DAGFINN.

Andres Skialdarband, the Earl's friend.
[*A short pause; uneasy whispers pass among the men.*

HÅKON.

Where is the messenger?

DAGFINN.

[*Leading the man forward.*] Here, my lord King.

HÅKON.

What caused the slaying?

THE MESSENGER.

That no man knows. The talk fell upon the Finnish tribute, and on a sudden Andres sprang up and gave him his death-wound.

HÅKON.

Had there been quarrels between them before?

THE MESSENGER.

Ever and anon. Andres would often say that a wise councillor here in the south had written to him that he should be as rock and flint toward Vegard Væradal.

DAGFINN.

Strange! Ere Vegard set forth he told me that a wise councillor had said he should be as rock and flint toward Andres Skialdarband.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Spitting.*] Shame upon such councillors.

HÅKON.

We will not question more closely from what root this wrong has grown. Two faithful souls have I lost this day. I could weep for Vegard, but 'tis no time for weeping; it must be life for life. Sir Earl, Andres Skialdarband is your sworn retainer; you offered me all service in requital for Ivar Bodde. I take you at your word, and look to you to see that this misdeed be avenged.

EARL SKULE.

Of a truth, bad angels are at work between us to-day. On any other of my men, I would have suffered you to avenge the murder——

HÅKON.

[*Expectantly.*] Well?

EARL SKULE.

But not on Andres Skialdarband.

HÅKON.

[*Flashing out.*] Will you shield the murderer?

EARL SKULE.

T h i s murderer I m u s t shield.

HÅKON.

And the reason?

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EARL SKULE.

That none but God in heaven may know.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Softly, to* DAGFINN.] I know it.

DAGFINN.

And I suspect it.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Say nought, good Dagfinn!

HÅKON.

Earl, I will believe as long as I may, that you mean not in good sooth what you have said to me——

EARL SKULE.

Were it my own father Andres Skialdarband had slain, he should still go free. Ask me no more.

HÅKON.

Good. Then we ourselves must do justice in the matter!

EARL SKULE.

[*With an expression of alarm.*] There will be bloodshed on both sides, my lord King!

HÅKON.

So be it; none the less shall the deed be avenged.

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EARL SKULE.

It shall n o t be!—It c a n n o t be!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Nay, there the Earl is right.

HÅKON.

Say you so, my honoured lord?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Andres Skialdarband has taken the Cross.

HÅKON AND EARL SKULE.

Taken the Cross!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And has already sailed from the land.

EARL SKULE.

'Tis well for all of us!

HÅKON.

The day wanes; the bridal-feast must now be at an end. I thank you, Sir Earl, for all the honour that has been shown me in these days.—You are bound for Nidaros, as I think?

EARL SKULE.

That is my intent.

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HÅKON.

And I for Viken.—If you, Margrete, choose rather to abide in Bergen, then do so.

MARGRETE.

Whither you go, I go, until you forbid.

HÅKON.

Good; then come with me.

SIGRID.

Now is our kindred spread far abroad. [*Kneels to* HÅKON.] Grant me a grace, my lord King.

HÅKON.

Rise, Lady Sigrid; whatever you crave shall be granted.

SIGRID.

I cannot go with the Earl to Nidaros. The nunnery at Rein will soon be consecrated; write to the Archbishop—take order that I be made Abbess.

EARL SKULE.

You, my sister?

HÅKON.

You will enter a nunnery!

SIGRID.

[*Rising.*] Since my wedding-night of blood, when the Baglers came and hewed down my bridegroom, and

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many hundreds with him, and fired Nidaros town at all its corners—since then, it has been as though the blood and flames had dulled and deadened my sight for the world around me. But power was given me to catch glimpses of that which other eyes see not—and one thing I see now: a time of great dread hanging over this land!

EARL SKULE.

[*Vehemently.*] She is sick! Heed her not!

SIGRID.

A plenteous harvest is ripening for him that reaps in the darkness. Every woman in Norway will have but one task now—to kneel in church and cloister, and pray both day and night.

HÅKON.

[*Shaken.*] Is it prophecy or soul-sickness that speaks thus?

SIGRID.

Farewell, my brother—we shall meet once more.

EARL SKULE.

[*Involuntarily.*] When?

SIGRID.

[*Softly.*] When you take the crown; in the hour of danger,—when you are fain of me in your direst need.

[*Goes out to the right, with* MARGRETE, LADY RAGNHILD, *and the women.*

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HÅKON.

[*After a short pause, draws his sword, and says with quiet determination:*] All the Earl's men shall take the oath of fealty.

EARL SKULE.

[*Vehemently.*] Is this your settled purpose? [*Almost imploringly.*] King Håkon, do not so!

HÅKON.

No Earl's man shall leave Bergen ere he has sworn fealty to the King.

[*Goes out with his Guard. All except the* EARL *and the* BISHOP *follow him.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He has dealt hardly with you to-day!

[EARL SKULE *is silent, and looks out after the* KING, *as though struck dumb.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*More loudly.*] And mayhap not king-born after all.

EARL SKULE.

[*Turns suddenly, in strong excitement, and seizes the* BISHOP *by the arm.*] Trond the Priest's confession—where is it?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He sent it to me from England ere he died; I know not by whom—and it never reached me.

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EARL SKULE.

But it must be found!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I doubt not but it may.

EARL SKULE.

And if you find it, you will give it into my hands?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

That I promise.

EARL SKULE.

You swear it by your soul's salvation?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I swear it by my soul's salvation!

EARL SKULE.

Good; till that time I will work against Håkon, wherever it can be done secretly and unnoted. He must be hindered from growing mightier than I, ere the struggle begins.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

But should it prove that he is in truth king-born—what then?

EARL SKULE.

Then I must try to pray—to pray for humbleness, that I may serve him with all my might, as a faithful chieftain.

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

And if he be not the rightful king?

EARL SKULE.

Then shall he give place to me! The kingly title and the kingly throne, host and guard, fleet and tribute, towns and strongholds, all shall be mine!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He will betake him to Viken——

EARL SKULE.

I will drive him out of Viken!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He will establish himself in Nidaros.

EARL SKULE

I will storm Nidaros!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He will shut himself up in Olaf's holy church——

EARL SKULE.

I will force the sanctuary——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He will fly to the high altar, and cling to Olaf's shrine——

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EARL SKULE.

I will drag him down from the altar, though I drag the shrine along with him——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

But the crown will still be on his head, Earl Skule!

EARL SKULE.

I will strike off the crown with my sword!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

But if it sits too tight——?

EARL SKULE.

Then, in God's name or Satan's—I will strike off the head along with it! [*Goes out to the right.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Looks out after him, nods slowly, and says:*] Ay—ay —'tis in this mood I like the Earl!

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ACT THIRD

A room in the Bishop's Palace at Oslo.[1] *On the right is the entrance door. In the back, a small door, standing open, leads into the Chapel, which is lighted up. A curtained door in the left wall leads into the Bishop's sleeping-room. In front, on the same side, stands a cushioned couch. Opposite, on the right, is a writing-table, with letters, documents, and a lighted lamp.*

At first the room is empty; behind the curtain on the left, the singing of monks is heard. Presently PAUL FLIDA, *in travelling dress, enters from the right, stops by the door, waits, looks around, and then knocks three times with his staff upon the floor.*

SIRA VILIAM.

[*Comes out from the left, and exclaims in a hushed voice.*] Paul Flida! God be praised;—then the Earl is not far off.

PAUL FLIDA.

The ships are already at Hoved-isle; I came on ahead. And how goes it with the Bishop?

SIRA VILIAM.

He is even now receiving the Extreme Unction.

[1] An ancient city close to the present Christiania.

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PAUL FLIDA.

Then there is great danger.

SIRA VILIAM.

Master Sigard of Brabant has said that he cannot outlive the night.

PAUL FLIDA.

Then meseems he has summoned us too late.

SIRA VILIAM.

Nay, nay,—he has his full senses and some strength to boot; every moment he asks if the Earl comes not soon.

PAUL FLIDA.

You still call him E a r l; know you not that the King has granted him the title of Duke?

SIRA VILIAM.

Ay, ay, we know it; 'tis but old custom. Hist!

[*He and* PAUL FLIDA *cross themselves and bow their heads. From the Bishop's door issue two acolytes with candles, then two more with censers; then priests bearing chalice, paten, and crucifix, and a church banner; behind them a file of priests and monks; acolytes with candles and censers close the procession, which passes slowly into the chapel. The door is shut behind them.*

PAUL FLIDA.

So now the old lord has made up his account with the world.

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SIRA VILIAM.

I can tell him that Duke Skule comes so soon as may be?

PAUL FLIDA.

He comes straight from the wharf up here to the Palace. Farewell! [*Goes.*

[*Several priests, among them* PETER, *with some of the* BISHOP'S *servants, come out from the left with rugs, cushions, and a large brazier.*

SIRA VILIAM.

Why do you this?

A PRIEST.

[*Arranging the couch.*] The Bishop wills to lie out here.

SIRA VILIAM.

But is it prudent?

THE PRIEST.

Master Sigard thinks we may humour him. Here he is.

BISHOP NICHOLAS *enters, supported by* MASTER SIGARD *and a priest. He is in his canonicals, but without crozier and mitre.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Light more candles. [*He is led to a seat upon the couch, near the brazier, and is covered with rugs.*] Viliam! Now have I been granted forgiveness for all my sins! They took them all away with them;—meseems I am so light now.

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SIRA VILIAM.

The Duke sends you greeting, my lord; he has already passed Hoved-isle!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

'Tis well, very well. Belike the King, too, will soon be here. I have been a sinful hound in my day, Viliam; I have grievously trespassed against the King. The priests in there averred that all my sins should be forgiven me;—well well, it may be so; but 'tis easy for them to promise; 'tis not against t h e m that I have trespassed. No no; it is safest to have it from the King's own mouth. [*Exclaims impatiently.*] Light, I say! 'tis so dark in here.

SIRA VILIAM.

The candles are lighted——

MASTER SIGARD.

[*Stops him by a sign, and approaches the* BISHOP.] How goes it with you, my lord?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

So-so—so-so; my hands and feet are cold.

MASTER SIGARD.

[*Half aloud, as he moves the brazier nearer.*] Ha—'tis the beginning of the end.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Apprehensively, to* VILIAM.] I have commanded that eight monks shall chant and pray for me in the chapel

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to-night. Have an eye to them; there are idle fellows among them.

[SIRA VILIAM *points silently towards the chapel, whence singing is heard, which continues during what follows.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

So much still undone, and to go and leave it all! So much undone, Viliam!

SIRA VILIAM.

My lord, think of heavenly things!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I have time before me;—till well on in the morning, Master Sigard thinks——

SIRA VILIAM.

My lord, my lord!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Give me mitre and crozier!—'Tis very well for you to say that I should think—— [*A priest brings them.*] So, set the cap there, 'tis too heavy for me; give me the crozier in my hand; there, now am I in my armour. A bishop!—— The Evil One dare not grapple with me now!

SIRA VILIAM.

Desire you aught beside?

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

No. Stay—tell me:—Peter, Andres Skialdarband's son,—all speak well of him——

SIRA VILIAM.

In truth, his is a blameless soul.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Peter, you shall watch beside me until the King or the Duke shall come. Leave us, meanwhile, ye others, but be at hand. [*All except* PETER *go out on the right.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*After a short pause.*] Peter!

PETER.

[*Approaches.*] My lord?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Hast ever seen old men die?

PETER.

No.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

They are all afeard; that I dare swear. There on the table lies a large letter with seals to it; give it to me. [PETER *brings the letter.*] 'Tis to your mother.

PETER.

To my mother?

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

You must get you northward with it to Halogaland. I have written to her touching a great and weighty matter; tidings have come from your father.

PETER.

He is fighting as a soldier of God in the Holy Land. Should he fall there, he falls on hallowed ground; for there every foot's-breadth of earth is sacred. I commend him to God in all my prayers.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Is Andres Skialdarband dear to you?

PETER.

He is an honourable man; but there lives another man whose greatness my mother, as it were, fostered and nourished me withal.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Hurriedly and eagerly.*] Is that Duke Skule?

PETER.

Ay, the Duke—Skule Bårdsson. My mother knew him in younger days. The Duke must sure be the greatest man in the land!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

There is the letter; get you northward with it forthwith!—Are they not singing in there?

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PETER.

They are, my lord!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Eight lusty fellows with throats like trumpets, they must surely help somewhat, methinks.

PETER.

My lord, my lord! Why not pray yourself?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I have too much still undone, Peter. Life is all too short;—besides, the King will surely forgive me when he comes—— [*Gives a start in pain.*

PETER.

You are suffering?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I suffer not; but there is a ringing in mine ears, a twinkling and flickering before mine eyes——

PETER.

'Tis the heavenly bells ringing you home, and the twinkling of the altar-lights God's angels have lit for you.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, sure 'tis so;—there is no danger if only they lag not with their prayers in there—— Farewell; set forth at once with the letter.

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PETER.

Shall I not first——?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Nay, go; I fear not to be alone.

PETER.

Well met again, then, what time the heavenly bells shall sound for me too. [*Goes out on the right.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The heavenly bells,—ay, 'tis easy talking when you still have two stout legs to stand upon.—So much undone! But much will live after me, notwithstanding. I promised the Duke by my soul's salvation to give him Trond the Priest's confession if it came into my hand;—'tis well I have not got it. Had he certainty, he would conquer or fall; and then one of the twain would be the mightiest man that ever lived in Norway. No no,—what *I* could not reach none other shall reach. Uncertainty serves best; so long as the Duke is burdened with that, they two will waste each other's strength, wheresoever they may; towns will be burnt, dales will be harried,—neither will gain by the other's loss—[*Terrified.*] Mercy, pity! It is I who bear the guilt—I, who set it all agoing! [*Calming himself.*] Well, well, well! but now the King is coming—'tis he that suffers most—he will forgive me—prayers and masses shall be said; there is no danger;—I am a bishop, and I have never slain any man with mine own hand.—'Tis well that Trond the Priest's confession came not; the saints are with me, they will not tempt me to break my promise. —Who knocks at the door? It must be the Duke!

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[*Rubs his hands with glee.*] He will implore me for proofs as to the kinship,—and I have no proofs to give him!

INGA OF VARTEIG *enters; she is dressed in black, with a cloak and hood.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Starts.*] Who is that?

INGA.

A woman from Varteig in Borgasyssel, my honoured lord.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The King's mother!

INGA.

So was I called once.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Go, go! 'Twas not I counselled Håkon to send you away.

INGA.

What the King does is well done; 'tis not therefor I come.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Wherefore then?

INGA.

Gunnulf, my brother, is come home from England——

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

From England——!

INGA.

He has been away these many years, as you know, and has roamed far and wide; now has he brought home a letter——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Breathlessly.*] A letter——?

INGA.

From Trond the Priest. 'Tis for you, my lord.
[*Hands it to him.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ah, truly;—and y o u bring it?

INGA.

It was Trond's wish. I owe him great thanks since the time he fostered Håkon. It was told me that you were sick; therefore I set forth at once; I have come hither on foot——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

There was no such haste, Inga!

DAGFINN THE PEASANT *enters from the right.*

DAGFINN.

God's peace, my honoured lord!

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Comes the King?

DAGFINN.

He is now riding down the Ryen hills, with the Queen and the King-child and a great following.

INGA.

[*Rushes up to* DAGFINN.] The King,—the King! Comes he hither?

DAGFINN.

Inga! You here, much-suffering woman!

INGA.

She is not much-suffering who has so great a son.

DAGFINN.

Now will his hard heart be melted.

INGA.

Not a word to the King of me. Yet, oh, I must see him!—Tell me,—comes he hither?

DAGFINN.

Ay, presently.

INGA.

And it is dark evening. The King will be lighted on his way with torches?

DAGFINN.

Yes.

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INGA.

Then will I hide me in a gateway as he goes by;—and then home to Varteig. But first will I into Hallvard's church; the lights are burning there to-night; there will I call down blessings on the King, on my fair son. [*Goes out to the right.*

DAGFINN.

I have fulfilled mine errand; I go to meet the King.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Bear him most loving greeting, good Dagfinn!

DAGFINN.

[*As he goes out to the right.*] *I* would not be Bishop Nicholas to-morrow.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Trond the Priest's confession——! So it has come after all—here I hold it in my hand. [*Muses with a fixed gaze.*] A man should never promise aught by his soul's salvation, when he is as old as I. Had I years before me, I could always wriggle free from such a promise; but this evening, this last evening—no, that were imprudent.—But can I keep it? Is it not to endanger all that I have worked for, my whole life through?—[*Whispering.*] Oh, could I but cheat the Evil One, only this one more time! [*Listens.*] What was t h a t ? [*Calls.*] Viliam, Viliam!

SIRA VILIAM *enters from the right.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

What is it that whistles and howls so grimly?

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SIRA VILIAM.

'Tis the storm; it grows fiercer.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The storm grows fiercer! Ay truly, I will keep my promise! The storm, say you——? Are they singing in there?

SIRA VILIAM.

Yes, my lord.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Bid them bestir themselves, and chiefly brother Aslak; he always makes such scant prayers; he shirks whenever he can; he skips, the hound! [*Strikes the floor with his crozier.*] Go in and say to him 'tis the last night I have left; he shall bestir himself, else will I haunt him from the dead!

SIRA VILIAM.

My lord, shall I not fetch Master Sigard?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Go in, I say! [VILIAM *goes into the chapel.*] It must doubtless be heaven's will that I should reconcile the King and the Duke, since it sends me Trond's letter now. This is a hard thing, Nicholas; to tear down at a single wrench what you have spent your life in building up. But there is no other way; I must e'en do the will of heaven this time.—If I could only read what is written in the letter! But I cannot see a word! Mists drive before my eyes; they sparkle and flicker; and I dare let none other read it for me! To make such a promise——! Is human cunning, then, so poor a thing

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that it cannot govern the outcome of its contrivances in the second and third degree? I spoke so long and so earnestly to Vegard Væradal about making the King send Inga from him, that at length it came to pass. That was wise in the first degree; but had I not counselled thus, then Inga had not now been at Varteig, the letter had not come into my hands in time, and I had not had any promise to keep—therefore 'twas unwise in the second degree. Had I yet time before me——! but only the space of one night, and scarce even that. I must, I will live longer! [*Knocks with his crozier; a priest enters from the right.*] Bid Master Sigard come! [*The priest goes; the* BISHOP *crushes the letter in his hands.*] Here, under this thin seal, lies Norway's saga for a hundred years! It lies and dreams, like the birdling in the egg! Oh, that I had more souls than o n e—or else n o n e! [*Presses the letter wildly to his breast.*] Oh, were not the end so close upon me,—and judgment and doom—I would hatch you out into a hawk that should cast the dreadful shadow of his wings over all the land, and strike his sharp talons into every heart! [*With a sudden shudder.*] But the last hour is at hand! [*Shrieking.*] No, no! You shall become a swan, a white swan! [*Throws the letter far from him, on to the floor, and calls:*] Master Sigard, Master Sigard!

MASTER SIGARD.

[*From the right.*] How goes it, honoured lord!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Master Sigard—sell me three days' life!

MASTER SIGARD.

I have told you——

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Yes, yes; but that was in jest; 'twas a little revenge on me. I have been a tedious master to you; therefore you thought to scare me. Fie, that was evil,—nay, nay—'twas no more than I deserved! But, now be good and kind! I will pay you well;—three days' life, Master Sigard, only three days' life!

MASTER SIGARD.

Though I myself were to die in the same hour as you, yet could I not add three days to your span.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

O n e day, then, only o n e day! Let it be light, let the sun shine when my soul sets forth! Listen, Sigard! [*Beckons him over, and drags him down upon the couch.*] I have given well-nigh all my gold and silver to the Church, to have high masses sung for me. I will take it back again; you shall have it all! How now, Sigard, shall we two fool them in there? He-he-he! You will be rich, Sigard, and can depart the country; I shall have time to cast about me a little, and make shift with fewer prayers. Come, Sigard, shall we——! [SIGARD *feels his pulse; the* BISHOP *exclaims anxiously:*] How now, why answer you not?

MASTER SIGARD.

[*Rising.*] I have no time, my lord. I must prepare you a draught that may ease you somewhat at the last.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Nay, wait with that! Wait,—and answer me!

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MASTER SIGARD.

I have no time; the draught must be ready within an hour. [*Goes out to the right.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Within an hour! [*Knocks wildly.*] Viliam! Viliam!

[SIRA VILIAM *comes out from the chapel.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Call more to help in there! The eight are not enough!

SIRA VILIAM.

My lord——?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

More to help, I say! Brother Kolbein has lain sick these five weeks,—he cannot have sinned much in that time——

SIRA VILIAM.

He was at shrift yesterday.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Eagerly.*] Ay, he must be good; call him! [VILIAM *goes into the chapel again.*] Within an hour! [*Dries the sweat off his brow.*] Pah—how hot it is here!—The miserable hound—what boots all his learning, when he cannot add an hour to my life? There sits he in his closet day by day, piecing together his cunning wheels and weights and levers; he thinks to fashion a machine that shall go and go and never stop—*perpetuum mobile* he calls it. Why not rather turn his art and his skill

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to making man such a *perpetuum mobile?* [*Stops and thinks; his eyes light up.*] *Perpetuum mobile,*—I am not strong in Latin—but it means somewhat that has power to work eternally, through all the ages. If I myself, now, could but——? T h a t were a deed to end my life withal! That were to do my greatest deed in my latest hour! To set wheel and weight and lever at work in the King's soul and the Duke's; to set them a-going so that no power on earth can stop them; if I can but do that, then shall I live indeed, live in my work—and, when I think of it, mayhap 'tis t h a t which is called immortality.—Comfortable, soothing thoughts, how ye do the old man good! [*Draws a deep breath, and stretches himself comfortably upon the couch.*] Diabolus has pressed me hard to-night. That comes of lying idle; *otium est pulvis—pulveris*—pooh, no matter for the Latin—— Diabolus shall no longer have power over me; I will be busy to the last; I will——; how they bellow in yonder—— [*Knocks;* VILIAM *comes out.*] Tell them to hold their peace; they disturb me. The King and the Duke will soon be here; I have weighty matters to ponder.

SIRA VILIAM.

My lord, shall I then——?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Bid them hold awhile, that I may think in peace. Look you, take up yonder letter that lies upon the floor.—Good. Reach me the papers here——

SIRA VILIAM.

[*Goes to the writing-table.*] Which, my lord?

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

It matters not——; the sealed ones; those that lie uppermost—So; go now in and bid them be silent. [VILIAM *goes*.] To die, and yet rule in Norway! To die, and yet so contrive things that no man may come to raise his head above the rest. A thousand ways may lead towards that goal; yet can there be but o n e that will reach it;—and now to find that one—to find it and follow it—— Ha! The way lies so close, so close at hand! Ay, so it must be. I will keep my promise; the Duke shall have the letter in his hands;—but the King—he shall have the thorn of doubt in his heart. Håkon is upright, as they call it; many things will go to wreck in his soul along with the faith in himself and in his right. Both of them shall doubt and believe by turns, still swaying to and fro, and finding no firm ground beneath their feet—*perpetuum mobile!*—But will Håkon believe what I say? Ay, that will he; am I not a dying man?—And to prepare the way I will feed him up with truths.—My strength fails, but fresh life fills my soul;—I no longer lie on a sick-bed, I sit in my workroom; I will work the last night through, work—till the light goes out——

DUKE SKULE.

[*Enters from the right and advances towards the* BISHOP.] Peace and greeting, my honoured lord! I hear it goes ill with you.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

I am a corpse in the bud, good Duke; this night shall I break into bloom; to-morrow you may scent my perfume.

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DUKE SKULE.

Already to-night, say you?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Master Sigard says within an hour.

DUKE SKULE.

And Trond the Priest's letter——?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Think you still upon that?

DUKE SKULE.

'Tis never out of my thoughts.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

The King has made you Duke; before you, no man in Norway has borne that title.

DUKE SKULE.

'Tis not enough. If Håkon be not the rightful king, then must I have all!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ha, 'tis cold in here; the blood runs icy through my limbs.

DUKE SKULE.

Trond the Priest's letter, my lord! For Almighty God's sake,—have you it?

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

At least, I know where it may be found.

DUKE SKULE.

Tell me then, tell me!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Wait—

DUKE SKULE.

Nay, nay—lose not your time; I see it draws to an end;—and 'tis sad the King comes hither.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, the King comes; thereby you may best see that I am mindful of your cause, even n o w.

DUKE SKULE.

What is your purpose?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Mind you, at the King's bridal—you said that Håkon's strength lay in his steadfast faith in himself?

DUKE SKULE.

Well?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

If I confess, and raise a doubt in his mind, then his faith will fall, and his strength with it.

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DUKE SKULE.

My lord, this is sinful, sinful, if he be the rightful king.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

'Twill be in your power to restore his faith. Ere I depart hence, I will tell you where Trond the Priest's letter may be found.

SIRA VILIAM.

[*From the right.*] The King is now coming up the street, with torch-bearers and attendants.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

He shall be welcome. [VILIAM *goes.*] Duke, I beg of you one last service: do you carry on my feuds against all mine enemies. [*Takes out a letter.*] Here I have written them down. Those whose names stand first I would fain have hanged, if it could be so ordered.

DUKE SKULE.

Think not upon vengeance now; you have but little time left——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Not on vengeance, but on punishment. Promise me to wield the sword of punishment over all mine enemies when I am gone. They are your foemen no less than mine; when you are King you must chastise them; do you promise me that?

DUKE SKULE.

I promise and swear it; but Trond's letter——!

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

You shall learn where it is;—but see—the King comes; hide the list of our foemen!

[*The* DUKE *hides the paper; at the same moment* HÅKON *enters from the right.*

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Well met at the grave-feast, my lord King.

HÅKON.

You have ever withstood me stubbornly; but that shall be forgiven and forgotten now; death wipes out even the heaviest reckoning.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

That lightened my soul! Oh how marvellous is the King's clemency! My lord, what you have done for an old sinner this night shall be tenfold——

HÅKON.

No more of that; but I must tell you that I greatly marvel you should summon me hither to obtain my forgiveness, and yet prepare for me such a meeting as this.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Meeting, my lord?

DUKE SKULE.

'Tis of me the King speaks. Will you, my lord Bishop, assure King Håkon, by my faith and honour,

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that I knew nought of his coming, ere I landed at Oslo wharf?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Alas, alas! The blame is all mine! I have been sickly and bedridden all the last year; I have learnt little or nought of the affairs of the kingdom; I thought all was now well between the princely kinsmen!

HÅKON.

I have marked that the friendship between the Duke and myself thrives best when we hold aloof from one another; therefore farewell, Bishop Nicholas, and God be with you where you are now to go.

[*Goes towards the door.*

DUKE SKULE.

[*Softly and uneasily.*] Bishop, Bishop, he is going!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Suddenly and with wild energy.*] Stay, King Håkon!

HÅKON.

[*Stops.*] What now?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

You shall not leave this room until old Bishop Nicholas has spoken his last word!

HÅKON.

[*Instinctively lays his hand upon his sword.*] Mayhap you have come well attended to Viken, Duke.

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DUKE SKULE.

I have no part in this.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

'Tis by force of words that I will hold you. Where there is a burial in the house, the dead man ever rules the roost; he can do and let alone as he will—so far as his power may reach. Therefore will I now speak my own funeral-speech; in days gone by, I was ever sore afraid lest King Sverre should come to speak it——

HÅKON.

Talk not so wildly, my lord!

DUKE SKULE.

You shorten the precious hour still left to you!

HÅKON.

Your eyes are already dim!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, my sight is dim; I scarce can see you where you stand; but before my inward eye, my life is moving in a blaze of light. T h e r e I see sights——; hear and learn, O King!—My race was the mightiest in the land; many great chieftains had sprung from it; *I* longed to be the greatest of them all. I was yet but a boy when I began to thirst after great deeds; meseemed I could by no means wait till I were grown. Kings arose who had less right than I,—Magnus Erlingsson, Sverre the Priest——; I also would be king; but I must needs be a chieftain first. Then came the battle at Ilevoldene;

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'twas the first time I went out to war. The sun went up, and glittering lightnings flashed from a thousand burnished blades. Magnus and all his men advanced as to a game; I alone felt a tightness at my heart. Fiercely our host swept forward; but I could not follow—I was afraid! All Magnus's other chieftains fought manfully, and many fell in the fight; but I fled up over the mountain, and ran and ran, and stayed not until I came down to the fiord again, far away. Many a man had to wash his bloody clothes in Trondheim-fiord that night;—I had to wash mine too, but not from blood. Ay, King, I was afraid;—born to be a chieftain—and afraid! It fell upon me as a thunderbolt; from that hour I hated all men. I prayed secretly in the churches, I wept and knelt before the altars, I gave rich gifts, made sacred promises; I tried and tried in battle after battle, at Saltösund, at Jonsvoldene that summer the Baglers lay in Bergen,—but ever in vain. Sverre it was who first noted it; he proclaimed it loudly and with mockery, and from that day forth, not a man in the host but laughed when Nicholas Arnesson was seen in war-weed. A coward, a coward—and yet was I filled with longing to be a chief, to be a king; nay, I felt I was born to be King. I could have furthered God's kingdom upon earth; but 'twas the saints themselves that barred the way for me.

HÅKON.

Accuse not Heaven, Bishop Nicholas! You have hated much.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Ay, I have hated much; hated every head in this land that raised itself above the crowd. But I hated

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because I could not love. Fair women,—oh, I could devour them even now with glistening eyes! I have lived eighty years, and yet do I yearn to kill men and clasp women;—but my lot in love was as my lot in war: nought but an itching will, my strength sapped from my birth; dowered with seething desire—and yet a weakling! So I became a priest: king or priest must that man be who would have all might in his hands. [*Laughs.*] I a priest! I a churchman! Yes, for one clerkly office Heaven had notably fitted me—for taking the high notes—for singing with a woman's voice at the great church-festivals. And yet they up yonder claim of me—the half-man—what they have a right to claim only of those whom they have in all things fitted for their life-work! There have been times when I fancied such a claim might be just; I have lain here on my sick-bed crushed by the dread of doom and punishment. Now it is over; my soul has fresh marrow in its bones; *I* have not sinned; it is *I* that have suffered wrong; *I* am the accuser!

DUKE SKULE.

[*Softly.*] My lord—the letter! You have little time left.

HÅKON.

Think of your soul, and humble you!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

A man's life-work is his soul, and my life-work still shall live upon the earth. But you, King Håkon, you should beware; for as Heaven has stood against me, and reaped harm for its reward, so are you standing against the man who holds the country's welfare in his hand——

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HÅKON.

Ha—Duke, Duke! Now I see the bent of this meeting.

DUKE SKULE.

[*Vehemently, to the* BISHOP.] Not a word more of this!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*To* HÅKON.] He will stand against you so long as his head sits fast on his shoulders. Share with him! I will have no peace in my coffin, I will rise again, if you two share not the kingdom! Neither of you shall add the other's height to his own stature. If that befell, there would be a giant in the land, and here shall no giant be; for I was never a giant!

[*Sinks back exhausted on the couch.*

DUKE SKULE.

[*Falls on his knees beside the couch and cries to* HÅKON.] Summon help! For God's pity's sake; the Bishop must not die yet!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

How it waxes dusk before my eyes!—King, for the last time—will you share with the Duke?

HÅKON.

Not a shred will I let slip of that which God gave me.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Well and good. [*Softly.*] Your faith, at least, you shall let slip. [*Calls.*] Viliam!

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DUKE SKULE.

[*Softly.*] The letter! The letter!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Not listening to him.*] Viliam! [VILIAM *enters; the* BISHOP *draws him close down to him and whispers.*] When I received the Extreme Unction, all my sins were forgiven me?

SIRA VILIAM.

All your sins from your birth, till the moment you received the Unction.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

No longer? Not until the very end?

SIRA VILIAM.

You will not sin to-night, my lord!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Who can tell——? Take the golden goblet Bishop Absalon left me—give it to the Church—and say seven high masses more.

SIRA VILIAM.

God will be gracious to you, my lord!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Seven more masses, I say—for sins I may commit to-night! Go, go! [VILIAM *goes; the* BISHOP *turns to* SKULE.] Duke, if you should come to read Trond the Priest's letter, and it should mayhap prove that Håkon is the rightful king—what would you do then?

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DUKE SKULE.

In God's name—king he should remain.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Bethink you; much is at stake. Search every fold of your heart; answer as though you stood before your Judge! What will you do, if he be the rightful king?

DUKE SKULE.

Bow my head and serve him.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Mumbles.*] So, so: then bide the issue. [*To* SKULE.] Duke, I am weak and weary; a mild and charitable mood comes over me——

DUKE SKULE.

It is death! Trond the Priest's letter! Where is it?

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

First another matter;—I gave you the list of my enemies——

DUKE SKULE.

[*Impatiently.*] Yes, yes; I will take full revenge upon them——

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

No, my soul is filled with mildness; I will forgive, as the Scripture commands. As you would forgo might, I will forgo revenge. Burn the list!

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DUKE SKULE.

Ay, ay; as you will.

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

Here, in the brazier; so that I may see it——

DUKE SKULE.

[*Throws the paper into the fire.*] There, then; see, it burns. And now, speak, speak. You risk thousands of lives if you speak not now!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*With sparkling eyes.*] Thousands of lives. [*Shrieks.*] Light! Air!

HÅKON.

[*Rushes to the door and cries.*] Help! The Bishop is dying!

SIRA VILIAM *and several of the* BISHOP'S *men enter.*

DUKE SKULE.

[*Shakes the* BISHOP'S *arm.*] You risk Norway's happiness through hundreds of years, mayhap its greatness to all eternity!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

To all eternity! [*Triumphantly.*] *Perpetuum mobile!*

DUKE SKULE.

By our soul's salvation,—where is Trond the Priest's letter?

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BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Calls.*] Seven more masses, Viliam!

DUKE SKULE.

[*Beside himself.*] The letter! The letter!

BISHOP NICHOLAS.

[*Smiling in his death-agony.*] 'Twas it you burned, good Duke! [*Falls back on the couch and dies.*

DUKE SKULE.

[*With an involuntary cry, starts backwards and covers his face with his hands.*] Almighty God!

THE MONKS.

[*Rushing in flight from the chapel.*] Save you, all who can!

SOME VOICES.

The powers of evil have broken loose!

OTHER VOICES.

There rang a loud laugh from the corner!—A voice cried: "We have him!"—— All the lights went out!

HÅKON.

Bishop Nicholas is even now dead.

THE MONKS.

[*Fleeing to the right.*] Pater noster—Pater noster.

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HÅKON.

[*Approaches* SKULE, *and says in a low voice.*] Duke, I will not question what secret counsel you were hatching with the Bishop ere he died;—but from to-morrow must you give up your powers and dignities into my hands; I see clearly now that we two cannot go forward together.

DUKE SKULE.

[*Looks at him absently.*] Go forward together——?

HÅKON.

To-morrow I hold an Assembly in the Palace; then must all things be made clear between us.

[*Goes out to the right.*

DUKE SKULE.

The Bishop dead and the letter burnt! A life full of doubt and strife and dread! Oh, could I but pray!—No—I must act; this evening must the stride be taken, once for all! [*To* VILIAM.] Whither went the King?

SIRA VILIAM.

[*Terrified.*] Christ save me,—what would you with him?

DUKE SKULE.

Think you I would slay him to-night?

[*Goes out to the right.*

SIRA VILIAM.

[*Looks after him, shaking his head, while the house-folk bear the body out to the left.*] Seven more masses,

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the Bishop said; I think 'twere safest we should say fourteen. [*Follows the others.*

A room in the Palace. In the back is the entrance door; in each of the side walls a smaller door; in front, on the right, a window. Hung from the roof, a lamp is burning. Close to the door on the left stands a bench, and further back a cradle, in which the King-child is sleeping; MARGRETE *is kneeling beside the child.*

MARGRETE.

[*Rocks the cradle and sings.*]

Now roof and rafters blend with
The starry vault on high;
Now flieth little Håkon
On dream-wings through the sky.

There mounts a mighty stairway
From earth to God's own land;
There Håkon with the angels
Goes climbing, hand in hand.

God's angel-babes are watching
Thy cot, the still night through;
God bless thee, little Håkon,
Thy mother watcheth too.

A short pause. DUKE SKULE *enters from the back.*

MARGRETE.

[*Starts up with a cry of joy and rushes to meet him.*] My father!—Oh, how I have sighed and yearned for this meeting!

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DUKE SKULE.

God's peace be with you, Margrete! Where is the King?

MARGRETE.

With Bishop Nicholas.

DUKE SKULE.

Ha,—then must he soon be here.

MARGRETE.

And you will talk together and be at one, be friends again, as in the old days?

DUKE SKULE.

That would I gladly.

MARGRETE.

'Twould rejoice Håkon no less; and I pray to God every day that so it may be. Oh, but come hither and see—— [*Takes his hand and leads him to the cradle.*

DUKE SKULE.

Your child!

MARGRETE.

Ay, that lovely babe is mine;—is it not marvellous? He is called Håkon, like the King! See, his eyes—nay, you cannot see them now he is sleeping—but he has great blue eyes; and he can laugh, and reach forth his hands to take hold of me,—and he knows me already. [*Smoothes out the bed-clothes tenderly.*

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DUKE SKULE.

Håkon will have sons, the Bishop foretold.

MARGRETE.

To me this little child is a thousand times dearer than all Norway's land—and to Håkon too. Meseems I cannot rightly believe my happiness; I have the cradle standing by my bedside; every night, as often as I waken, I look to see if it be there—I am fearful lest it should prove to be all a dream——

DUKE SKULE.

[*Listens and goes to the window.*] Is not that the King?

MARGRETE.

Ay; he is going up the other stair; I will bring him. [*Takes her father's hand and leads him playfully up to the cradle.*] Duke Skule! Keep watch over the King-child the while—for he is a King-child too—though I can never remember it! Should he wake, then bow deeply before him, and hail him as men hail kings! Now will I bring Håkon. Oh, God, God! now at last come light and peace over our house.

[*Goes out to the right.*

DUKE SKULE.

[*After a short and gloomy silence.*] Håkon has a son. His race shall live after him. If he die, he leaves an heir who stands nearer the throne than all others. All things thrive with Håkon. Mayhap he is not the rightful king; but his faith in himself stands firm as ever; the Bishop would have shaken it, but Death gave him

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not time, God gave him not leave. God watches over Håkon, and suffers him to keep the girdle of strength. Were I to tell him now? Were I to make oath to what the Bishop told me? What would it avail? None would believe me, neither Håkon nor the others. He would have believed the Bishop in the hour of death; the doubt would have rankled poisonously in him; but it was not to be. And deep-rooted as is Håkon's faith, so is my doubt deep-rooted; what man on earth can weed it out? None, none. The ordeal has been endured, God has spoken, and still Håkon may not be the rightful king, while my life goes to waste. [*Seats himself broodingly beside a table on the right.*] And if, now, I won the kingdom, would not the doubt dwell with me none the less, gnawing and wearing and wasting me away, with its ceaseless icy drip, drip.—Aye; but 'tis better to sit doubting on the throne than to stand down in the crowd, doubting of him who sits there in your stead.—There must be an end between me and Håkon! An end? But how? [*Rises.*] Almighty, thou who hast thus bestead me, thou must bear the guilt of the issue! [*Goes to and fro, stops and reflects.*] I must break down all bridges, hold only o n e, and there conquer or fall —as the Bishop said at the bridal-feast at Bergen. That is now nigh upon three years since, and through all that time have I split up and spilt my strength in trying to guard all the bridges. [*With energy.*] Now must I follow the Bishop's counsel; now or never! Here are we both in Oslo; this time I have more men than Håkon; why not seize the advantage—'tis so seldom on my side. [*Vacillating.*] But to-night——? At once——? No, no! Not to-night! Ha-ha-ha—there again!—pondering, wavering! Håkon knows not what that means; he goes straight forward, and so he con-

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quers! [*Going up the room, stops suddenly beside the cradle.*] The King-child!—How fair a brow! He is dreaming. [*Smoothes out the bed-clothes, and looks long at the child.*] Such an one as thou can save many things in a man's soul. I have no son. [*Bends over the cradle.*] He is like Håkon—— [*Shrinks suddenly backwards.*] The King-child, said the Queen! Bow low before him and hail him as men hail kings! Should Håkon die before me, this child will be raised to the throne; and I—I shall stand humbly before him, and bow low and hail him as king! [*In rising agitation.*] This child, Håkon's son, shall sit on high, on the seat that should in right, mayhap, be mine—and I shall stand before his footstool, white-haired and bowed with age, and see my whole life-work lying undone—die without having been king!—I have more men than Håkon—there blows a storm to-night, and the wind sweeps down the fiord——! If I took the King-child? I am safe with the Trönders.[1] What would Håkon dare attempt, were his child in my power? My men will follow me, fight for me and conquer. Their reward shall be kingly, and they know it.—So shall it be! I will take the stride; I will leap the abyss, for the first time! Could I but see if thou hast Sverre's eyes—or Håkon Sverresson's——! He sleeps. I cannot see them. [*A pause.*] Sleep is as a shield. Sleep in peace, thou little Pretender! [*Goes over to the table.*] Håkon shall decide; once again will I speak with him.

MARGRETE.

[*Enters, with the* KING, *from the room on the right.*] The Bishop dead! Oh, trust me, all strife dies with him.

[1] Men of the Trondheim district.

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HÅKON.

To bed, Margrete! You must be weary after the journey.

MARGRETE.

Yes, yes. [*To the* DUKE.] Father, be kind and yielding—Håkon has promised to be the like! A thousand good-nights, to both of you!

[*Makes a gesture of farewell at the door on the left, and goes out; two women carry out the cradle.*

DUKE SKULE.

King Håkon, this time we must not part as foes. All evil will follow; there will fall a time of dread upon the land.

HÅKON.

The land has known nought else through many generations; but, see you, God is with me; every foeman falls that would stand against me. There are no more Baglers, no Slittungs, no Ribbungs; Earl Jon is slain, Guthorm Ingesson is dead, Sigurd Ribbung likewise—all claims that were put forth at the folkmote at Bergen have fallen powerless—from whom, then, should the time of dread come now?

DUKE SKULE.

Håkon, I fear me it might come from me!

HÅKON.

When I came to the throne, I gave you the third part of the kingdom——

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DUKE SKULE.

But kept two-thirds yourself!

HÅKON.

You ever thirsted after more; I eked out your share until now you hold half the kingdom.

DUKE SKULE.

There lack ten ship-wards.[1]

HÅKON.

I made you Duke; that has no man been in Norway before you.

DUKE SKULE.

But you are king! I must have no king over me! I was not born to serve you; I must rule in my own right!

HÅKON.

[*Looks at him for a moment, and says coldly:*] Heaven guard your understanding, my lord. Good night.

[*Going.*

DUKE SKULE.

[*Blocking the way.*] You shall not go from me thus! Beware, or I will forswear all faith with you; you can no longer be my overlord; we two must share!

HÅKON.

You dare to say this to me!

[1] *Skibreder*, districts each of which furnished a ship to the fleet.

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DUKE SKULE.

I have more men than you in Oslo, Håkon Håkonsson.

HÅKON.

Mayhap you think to——

DUKE SKULE.

Hearken to me! Think of the Bishop's words! Let us share; give me the ten ship-wards; let me hold my share as a free kingdom, without tax or tribute. Norway has ere this been parted into two kingdoms;—we will hold firmly together——

HÅKON.

Duke, you must be soul-sick, that you can crave such a thing.

DUKE SKULE.

Ay, I am soul-sick, and there is no other healing for me. We two must be equals; there must be no man over me!

HÅKON.

Every treeless skerry is a stone in the building which Harald Hårfager and the sainted King Olaf reared; would you have me break in twain what they have mortised together? Never!

DUKE SKULE.

Well, then let us reign by turns; let each bear sway for three years! You have reigned long; now my turn has come. Depart from the land for three years;—I

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will be king the while; I will even out your paths for you against your home-coming; I will guide all things for the best;—it wears and blunts the senses to sit ever on the watch. Håkon, hear me—three years each; let us wear the crown by turns!

HÅKON.

Think you my crown would fit well on your brow?

DUKE SKULE.

No crown is too wide for m e !

HÅKON.

It needs a God-sent right and a God-sent calling to wear the crown.

DUKE SKULE.

And know you so surely that you have a God-sent right?

HÅKON.

I have God's own word for it.

DUKE SKULE.

Rest not too surely on that. Had the Bishop had time to speak—but that were bootless now; you would not believe me. Ay, truly you have mighty allies on high; but I defy you none the less! You will not reign by turns with me? Well—then must we try the last resort;—Håkon, let us two fight for it, man to man, with heavy weapons, for life or death!

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HÅKON.

Speak you in jest, my lord?

DUKE SKULE.

I speak for my life-work and for my soul's salvation!

HÅKON.

Then is there small hope for the saving of your soul.

DUKE SKULE.

You will not fight with me? You shall, you shall!

HÅKON.

Oh blinded man! I cannot but pity you. You think 'tis the Lord's calling that draws you toward the throne; you see not that 'tis nought but pride of heart. What is it that allures you? The royal circlet, the purple-bordered mantle, the right to be seated three steps above the floor;—pitiful, pitiful! Were t h a t kingship, I would cast it into your hat, as I cast a groat to a beggar.

DUKE SKULE.

You have known me since your childhood, and you judge me thus!

HÅKON.

You have wisdom and courage and all noble gifts of the mind; you are born to stand nearest a king, but not to be a king yourself.

DUKE SKULE.

That will we now put to the proof!

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HÅKON.

Name me a single king's-task you achieved in all the years you were regent for me! Were the Baglers or the Ribbungs ever mightier than then? You were in ripe manhood, yet the land was harried by rebellious factions; did you quell a single one of them? I was young and untried when I came to the helm—look at me—all fell before me when I became king; there are no Baglers, no Ribbungs left!

DUKE SKULE.

Beware how you boast of that; for t h e r e lies the greatest danger. Party must stand against party, claim against claim, region against region, if the king is to have the might. Every village, every family, must either need him or fear him. If you strike at the root of faction, at the same stroke you kill your own power.

HÅKON.

And you would be king—you, who think such thoughts! You had been well fitted for a chieftain's part in Erling Skakke's days; but the time has grown away from you, and you know it not. See you not, then, that Norway's realm, as Harald and Olaf built it up, may be likened to a church that stands as yet unconsecrate? The walls soar aloft with mighty buttresses, the vaultings have a noble span, the spire points upward, like a fir-tree in the forest; but the life, the throbbing heart, the fresh blood-stream, is lacking to the work; God's living spirit is not breathed into it; it stands unconsecrate.—*I* will bring consecration! Norway has been a k i n g d o m, it shall become a p e o p l e. The Trönder has stood against the man of Viken, the Agdeman against the Hor-

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dalander, the Halogalander against the Sogndalesman; all shall be one hereafter, and all shall feel and know that they are one! T h a t is the task which God has laid on my shoulders; t h a t is the work which now lies before the King of Norway. That life-work, Duke, I think you were best to leave untried, for truly it is beyond you.

DUKE SKULE.

[*Impressed.*] To unite——? To unite the Trönders and the men of Viken,—all Norway——? [*Sceptically.*] 'Tis impossible! Norway's saga tells of no such thing!

HÅKON.

For y o u 'tis impossible, for you can but work out the old saga afresh; for me, 'tis as easy as for the falcon to cleave the clouds.

DUKE SKULE.

[*In uneasy agitation.*] To unite the whole people—to awaken it so that it shall know itself o n e ! Whence got you so strange a thought? It runs through me like ice and fire. [*Vehemently.*] It comes from the devil, Håkon; it shall never be carried through while I have strength to buckle on my helm.

HÅKON.

'Tis from God the thought comes to me, and never shall I let it slip while I bear St. Olaf's circlet on my brow!

DUKE SKULE.

Then must St. Olaf's circlet fall from your brow!

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HÅKON

Who will make it fall?

DUKE SKULE.

I, if none other.

HÅKON.

You, Skule, will be harmless after to-morrow's Assembly.

DUKE SKULE.

Håkon! Tempt not God! Drive me not out upon the last ledge of the deep!

HÅKON.

[*Points to the door.*] Go, my lord—and be it forgotten that we have spoken with sharp tongues this night.

DUKE SKULE.

[*Looks hard at him for a moment, and says:*] Next time, 'twill be with sharper tongues we speak.

[*Goes to the back.*

HÅKON.

[*After a short pause.*] He threatens! No, no, it cannot come to that. He must, he shall give way and do my will; I have need of that strong arm, that cunning brain.—Whatsoever courage and wisdom and strength there may be in this land, all gifts that God has endowed men withal, are but granted them to my uses. For my service did all noble gifts fall to Duke Skule's share; to defy me is to defy Heaven; 'tis my duty to punish whosoever shall set himself up against Heaven's will—for Heaven has done so much for me.

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DAGFINN THE PEASANT.

[*Enters from the back.*] Be on your guard to-night, my lord; the Duke has surely evil in his mind.

HÅKON.

What say you?

DAGFINN.

What may be his drift, I know not; but sure am I that something is brewing.

HÅKON.

Can he think to fall upon us? Impossible, impossible!

DAGFINN.

No, 'tis something else. His ships lie clear for sailing; he has summoned an Assembly on board them.

HÅKON.

You must mistake——! Go, Dagfinn, and bring me sure tidings.

DAGFINN.

Ay ay, trust to me. [*Goes.*

HÅKON.

No,—'tis not to be thought of! The Duke dare not rise against me. God will not suffer it—God, who has hitherto guided all things for me so marvellously. I must have peace now, for 'tis now I must set about my work!—I have done so little yet; but I hear the unerring voice of the Lord calling to me: Thou shalt do a great king's-work in Norway!

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GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Enters from the back.*] My lord and King!

HÅKON.

Gregorius Jonsson! Come y o u hither?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

I offer myself for your service. Thus far have I followed the Duke; but now I dare follow him no further.

HÅKON.

What has befallen?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

That which no man will believe, when 'tis rumoured through the land.

HÅKON.

Speak, speak!

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

I tremble to hear the sound of my own words; know then—— [*He seizes the* KING'S *arm and whispers.*

HÅKON.

[*Starts backwards with a cry.*] Ha, are you distraught?

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Would to God I were.

HÅKON.

Unheard of! No, it cannot be true!

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GREGORIUS JONSSON.

By Christ's dear blood, so is it!

HÅKON.

Go, go; sound the trumpet-call for my guard; get all my men under arms. [GREGORIUS JONSSON *goes.*

HÅKON.

[*Paces the room once or twice, then goes quickly up to the door of* MARGRETE'S *chamber, knocks at it, takes one or two more turns through the room, then goes again to the door, knocks, and calls.*] Margrete!

[*Goes on pacing up and down.*

MARGRETE.

[*In the doorway, attired for the night, with her hair down; she has a red cloak round her shoulders, holding it close together over her breast.*] Håkon! Is it you?

HÅKON.

Yes, yes; come hither.

MARGRETE.

Oh, but you must not look at me; I was in bed already.

HÅKON.

I have other things to think of.

MARGRETE.

What has befallen.

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HÅKON.

Give me a good counsel! I have even now received the worst tidings.

MARGRETE.

[*Alarmed.*] What tidings, Håkon?

HÅKON.

That there are now two kings in Norway.

MARGRETE.

Two kings in Norway!—Håkon, where is my father?

HÅKON.

He has proclaimed himself king on board his ship; now he is sailing to Nidaros to be crowned.

MARGRETE.

Oh God, thou almighty——!

[*Sinks down on the bench, covers her face with her hands and weeps.*]

HÅKON.

Two kings in the land!

MARGRETE.

My husband the one—my father the other!

HÅKON.

[*Pacing restlessly up and down.*] Give me a good counsel, Margrete! Should I cross the country by way

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of the Uplands, come first to Nidaros, and prevent the crowning? No, it may not be done; my men are too few; there in the north he is more powerful than I.—Give me counsel; how can I have the Duke slain, ere he come to Nidaros?

MARGRETE.

[*Imploringly, with folded hands.*] Håkon, Håkon!

HÅKON.

Can you not hit upon a good device, I say, to have the Duke slain?

MARGRETE.

[*Sinks down from the bench in agony and remains kneeling.*] Oh, can you so utterly forget that he is my father?

HÅKON.

Your father——; ay, ay, it is true; I had forgotten. [*Raises her up.*] Sit, sit, Margrete; comfort you; do not weep; you have no fault in this. [*Goes over to the window.*] Duke Skule will be worse for me than all other foemen! God, God,—why hast thou stricken me so sorely, when I have in nowise sinned! [*A knock at the door in the back; he starts, listens, and cries:*] Who knocks so late?

INGA'S VOICE.

[*Without.*] One who is a-cold, Håkon!

HÅKON.

[*With a cry.*] My mother!

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MARGRETE.

[*Springs up.*] Inga!

HÅKON.

[*Rushes to the door and opens it;* INGA *is sitting on the doorstep.*] My mother! Sitting like a dog outside her son's door! And I ask why God has stricken me!

INGA.

[*Stretches out her arms towards him.*] Håkon, my child! Blessings upon you!

HÅKON.

[*Raising her up.*] Come—come in; here are light and warmth!

INGA.

M a y I come in to you?

HÅKON.

Never shall we part again.

INGA.

My son—my King—oh, but you are good and loving! I stood in a corner and saw you, as you came from the Bishop's Palace; you looked so sorrowful; I c o u l d not part from you thus.

HÅKON.

God be thanked for that! No one, truly, could have come to me more welcome than you! Margrete—my

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mother—I have sorely sinned; I have barred my heart against you two, who are so rich in love.

MARGRETE.

[*Falls on his neck.*] Oh, Håkon, my beloved husband; do I stand near you now?

HÅKON.

Ay, near me, near me; not to give me cunning counsels, but to shed light over my path. Come what will, I feel the Lord's strength within me!

DAGFINN THE PEASANT.

[*Enters hastily from the back.*] My lord, my lord! the worst has befallen!

HÅKON.

[*Smiles confidently while he holds* MARGRETE *and* INGA *closely to him.*] I know it; but there is nought to fear, good Dagfinn! If there be two kings in Norway, there is but one in Heaven—and He will set all straight!

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ACT FOURTH

The great hall in Oslo Palace. KING SKULE *is feasting with the Guard and his Chiefs. In front, on the left, stands the throne, where* SKULE *sits, richly attired, with a purple mantle and the royal circlet on his head. The supper-table, by which the guests are seated, stretches from the throne towards the background. Opposite to* SKULE *sit* PAUL FLIDA *and* BÅRD BRATTE. *Some of the humbler guests are standing, to the right. It is late evening; the hall is brightly lighted. The banquet is drawing to a close; the men are very merry, and some of them drunk; they drink to each other, laugh, and all talk together.*

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Rises and strikes the table.*] Silence in the hall; Jatgeir Skald will say forth his song in honour of King Skule.

JATGEIR.

[*Stands out in the middle of the floor.*[1]

Duke Skule he summoned the Örething [2]
When 'twas mass-time in Nidaros town;
And the bells rang and swords upon bucklers clashed bravely
When Duke Skule he donned the crown.

[1] The metre of this song is very rugged in the original, and the wording purposely uncouth.
[2] See note, p. 163.

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King Skule marched over the Dovrëfjeld,
His host upon snow-shoes sped;
The Gudbranddalesman he grovelled for grace,
But his hoard must e'en ransom his head.

King Skule south over Miösen fared,—
The Uplander cursed at his banner;
King Skule hasted through Raumarike
To Låka in Nannestad manor.

'Twas all in the holy Shrove-tide week
We met with the Birchleg horde;
Earl Knut was their captain—the swords with loud tongue
In the suit for the throne made award.

They say of a truth that since Svërre's days
Was never so hot a fight;
Red-sprent, like warriors' winding-sheets,
Grew the upland that erst lay white.

They took to their heels did the Birchenlegs,
Flinging from them both buckler and bill there;
Many hundreds, though, took to their heels nevermore,
For they lay and were icily chill there.

No man knows where King Håkon hideth;—
King Skule stands safe at the helm.
All hail and long life to thee, lord, in thy state
As King of all Norway's realm!

SKULE'S MEN.

[*Spring up with loud jubilation, hold goblets and beakers aloft, clash their weapons, and repeat:*

All hail and long life to thee, lord, in thy state
As King of all Norway's realm!

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KING SKULE.

Thanks for the song, Jatgeir Skald! 'Tis as I best like it; for it gives my men no less praise than myself.

JATGEIR.

The King is honoured when his men are praised.

KING SKULE.

Take as guerdon this arm-ring, stay with me, and be of my household; I will have many skalds about me.

JATGEIR.

'Twill need many, my lord, if all your great deeds are to be sung.

KING SKULE.

I will be threefold more bountiful than Håkon; the skald's song shall be honoured and rewarded like all other noble deeds, so long as I am king. Be seated; now you belong to my household; all you have need of shall be freely given you.

JATGEIR.

[*Seats himself.*] Ere long there will be a dearth of what I most need, my lord.

KING SKULE.

What mean you?

JATGEIR.

Foes to King Skule, whose flight and fall I can sing.

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MANY OF THE MEN.

[*Amid laughter and applause.*] Well said, Icelander!

PAUL FLIDA.

[*To* JATGEIR.] The song was good; but 'tis known there goes a spice of lying to every skaldwork, and yours was not without it.

JATGEIR.

Lying, Sir Marshal?

PAUL FLIDA.

Ay; you say no man knows where King Håkon is hiding; that is not true; we have certain tidings that Håkon is at Nidaros.

KING SKULE.

[*Smiling.*] He has claimed homage for the King-child, and given it the kingly title.

JATGEIR.

That have I heard; but I knew not that any man could give away that which he himself does not possess.

KING SKULE.

'Tis easiest to give what you yourself do not possess.

BÅRD BRATTE.

But it can scarce be easy to beg your way in mid-winter from Bergen to Nidaros.

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JATGEIR.

The fortunes of the Birchlegs move in a ring; they began hungry and frozen, and now they end in like case.

PAUL FLIDA.

'Tis rumoured in Bergen that Håkon has forsworn the Church and all that is holy; he heard not mass on New Year's day.

BÅRD BRATTE.

He could plead lawful hindrance, Paul; he stood all day cutting his silver goblets and dishes to pieces—he had naught else wherewith to pay his household.

[*Laughter and loud talk among the guests.*

KING SKULE.

[*Raises his goblet.*] I drink to you, Bård Bratte, and thank you and all my new men. You fought manfully for me at Låka, and bore a great part in the victory.

BÅRD BRATTE.

It was the first time I fought under you, my lord; but I soon felt that 'tis easy to conquer when such a chieftain as you rides at the head of the host. But I would we had not slain so many and chased them so far; for now I fear 'twill be long ere they dare face us again.

KING SKULE.

Wait till the spring: we shall meet them again, never fear. Earl Knut lies with the remnant at Tunsberg rock, and Arnbiörn Jonsson is gathering a force eastward

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in Viken; when they deem themselves strong enough, they will soon let us hear from them.

BÅRD BRATTE.

They will never dare to, after the great slaughter at Låka.

KING SKULE.

Then will we lure them forth with cunning.

MANY VOICES.

Ay, ay—do so, lord King!

BÅRD BRATTE.

You have good store of cunning, King Skule. Your foemen have never warning ere you fall upon them, and you are ever there where they least await you.

PAUL FLIDA.

'Tis therefore that the Birchlegs call us Vårbælgs.[1]

KING SKULE.

Others say Vargbælgs; but this I swear, that when next we meet, the Birchlegs shall learn how hard it is to turn such Wolf-skins inside out.

[1] The derivation of this word is doubtful. In the form *Vargbælg* it means Wolf-skin, from Icelandic *Vargr*=a wolf, and *Belgr*=the skin of an animal taken off whole. The more common form, however, is *Varbelg*, which, as P. A. Munch suggests ("Det Norske Folks Historie," iii. 219), may possibly come from *var* (our word "ware"), a covering, and may be an allusion to the falsity and cunning of the faction. What Ibsen understands by the form *Vårbælg* I cannot discover. *Vår* (Icelandic *Vâr*) means the springtide. The nickname had been applied to a political faction as early as 1190, and was merely revived as a designation for Skule's adherents.

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BÅRD BRATTE.

With their good will shall we never meet—'twill be a chase the whole country round.

KING SKULE.

Ay, that it shall be. First we must purge Viken, and make sure of all these eastward parts; then will we get our ships together, and sail round the Naze and up the coast to Nidaros.

BÅRD BRATTE.

And when you come in such wise to Nidaros, I scarce think the monks will deny to move St. Olaf's shrine out to the mote-stead, as they did in the autumn, when we swore allegiance.

KING SKULE.

The shrine *shall* out; I will bear my kingship in in all ways lawfully.

JATGEIR.

And I promise you to sing a great death-song, when you have slain the Sleeper.

[*An outburst of laughter among the men.*

KING SKULE.

The Sleeper?

JATGEIR.

Know you not, my lord, that King Håkon is called "Håkon the Sleeper," because he sits as though benumbed ever since you came to the throne?

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The Nærøfjord

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BÅRD BRATTE.

They say he lies ever with his eyes closed. Doubtless he dreams that he is still king.

KING SKULE.

Let him dream; he shall never dream himself back into the kingship.

JATGEIR.

Let his sleep be long and dreamless, then shall I have stuff for songs.

THE MEN.

Ay, ay, do as the skald says!

KING SKULE.

When so many good men counsel as one, the counsel must be good; yet will we not talk now of that matter. But one promise I will make: each of my men shall inherit the weapons and harness, and gold and silver, of whichever one of the enemy he slays; and each man shall succeed to the dignities of him he lays low. He who slays a baron shall himself be a baron; he who slays a thane, shall receive his thaneship; and all they who already hold such dignities and offices, shall be rewarded after other kingly sort.

THE MEN.

[*Spring up in wild delight.*] Hail, hail, King Skule! Lead us against the Birchlegs!

BÅRD BRATTE.

Now are you sure to conquer in all battles.

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PAUL FLIDA.

I claim Dagfinn the Peasant for myself; he owns a good sword that I have long hankered after.

BÅRD BRATTE.

I will have Bård Torsteinsson's hauberk; it saved his life at Låka, for it withstands both cut and thrust.

JATGEIR.

Nay, but let me have it; 'twill fit me better; you shall have five golden marks in exchange.

BÅRD BRATTE.

Where will you find five golden marks, Skald?

JATGEIR.

I will take them from Gregorius Jonsson when we come northward.

THE MEN.

[*All talking together.*] And I will have—I will have—— [*The rest becomes indistinct in the hubbub.*

PAUL FLIDA.

Away! Every man to his quarters; bethink you that you are in the King's hall.

THE MEN.

Ay, ay,—hail to the King, hail to King Skule!

KING SKULE.

To bed now, good fellows! We have sat long over the drinking-table to-night.

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A MAN-AT-ARMS.

[*As the crowd is trooping out.*] To-morrow we will cast lots for the Birchlegs' goods.

ANOTHER.

Rather leave it to luck!

SEVERAL.

Nay, nay!

OTHERS.

Ay, ay!

BÅRD BRATTE.

Now the Wolf-skins are fighting for the bear-fell.

PAUL FLIDA.

And they have yet to fell the bear.

[*All go out by the back.*

KING SKULE.

[*Waits till the men are gone; the tension of his features relaxes; he sinks upon a bench.*] How weary I am, weary to death. To live in the midst of that swarm day out and day in, to look smilingly ahead as though I were so immovably assured of right and victory and fortune. To have no creature with whom I may speak of all that gnaws me so sorely. [*Rises with a look of terror.*] And the battle at Låka! That I should have conquered there! Håkon sent his host against me; God was to judge and award between the two kings—and I conquered, conquered, as never any before has conquered the Birchlegs! Their shields stood upright

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in the snow, but there was none behind them—the Birchlegs took to the woods, and fled over upland and moor and lea as far as their legs would carry them. The unbelievable came to pass; Håkon lost and I won. There is a secret horror in that victory. Thou great God of Heaven! there rules, then, no certain law on high, that all things must obey? The right carries with it no conquering might? [*With a change of tone, wildly.*] I am sick, I am sick! — Wherefore should not the right be on my side? May I not deem that God himself would assure me of it, since he let me conquer? [*Brooding.*] The possibilities are even; — not a feather-weight more on the one side than on the other; and yet—[*shakes his head*]—yet the balance dips on Håkon's part. I have hatred and hot desire to cast into my scale, yet the balance dips on Håkon's part. When the thought of the kingly right comes over me unawares, 'tis ever he, not I, that is the true king. When I would see myself as the true king, I must do it with forethought, I must build up a whole fabric of subtleties, a work of cunning; I must hold memories aloof, and take faith by storm. It was not so before. What has befallen to fill me so full of doubt? The burning of the letter? No—that made the uncertainty eternal, but did not add to it. Has Håkon done any great and kingly deed in these later days? No, his greatest deeds were done while I least believed in him. [*Seats himself on the right.*] What i s it? Ha, strange! It comes and goes like a marsh-fire; it dances at the tip of my tongue, as when one has lost a word and cannot find it. [*Springs up.*] Ha! Now I have it! No——! Yes, yes! Now I have it!—"Norway has been a k i n g d o m, it shall become a p e o p l e; all shall be one, and all shall feel and know that they are one!" Since Håkon

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spoke those madman's words, he stands ever before me as the rightful king. [*Whispers with fixed and apprehensive gaze.*] What if God's calling glimmered through these strange words? If God had garnered up the thought till now, and would now strew it forth—and had chosen Håkon for his sower?

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Enters from the back.*] My lord King, I have tidings for you.

KING SKULE.

Tidings?

PAUL FLIDA.

A man who comes from down the fiord brings news that the Birchlegs in Tunsberg have launched their ships, and that many men have gathered in the town in these last days.

KING SKULE.

Good, we will go forth to meet them—to-morrow or the day after.

PAUL FLIDA.

It might chance, my lord King, that the Birchlegs had a mind to meet us first.

KING SKULE.

They have not ships enough for that, nor men.

PAUL FLIDA.

But Arnbiörn Jonsson is gathering both men and ships, all round in Viken.

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KING SKULE.

The better for us; we will crush them at one blow, as we did at Låka.

PAUL FLIDA.

My lord, 'tis not so easy to crush the Birchlegs twice following.

KING SKULE.

And wherefore not?

PAUL FLIDA.

Because Norway's saga tells not that the like has ever befallen. Shall I send forth scouts to Hoved-isle?

KING SKULE.

'Tis needless; the night is dark, and there is a sea-fog to boot.

PAUL FLIDA.

Well well, the King knows best; but bethink you, my lord, that all men are against you here in Viken. The townsfolk of Oslo hate you, and should the Birchlegs come, they will make common cause with them.

KING SKULE.

[*With animation.*] Paul Flida, were it not possible that I could win over the men of Viken to my side?

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Looks at him in astonishment, and shakes his head.*] No, my lord, it is not possible.

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KING SKULE.

And wherefore not?

PAUL FLIDA.

Why, for that you have the Trönders on your side.

KING SKULE.

I will have both the Trönders and the men of Viken!

PAUL FLIDA.

Nay, my lord, that cannot be!

KING SKULE.

Not possible! cannot be! And wherefore—wherefore not?

PAUL FLIDA.

Because the man of Viken is the man of Viken, the Trönder is the Trönder; because so it has always been, and no saga tells of a time when it was otherwise.

KING SKULE.

Ay, ay—you are right. Go.

PAUL FLIDA.

And send forth no scouts?

KING SKULE.

Wait till daybreak. [PAUL FLIDA *goes*.] Norway's saga tells of no such thing; it has never been so yet; Paul Flida answers me as I answered Håkon. Are

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there, then, upward as well as downward steps? Stands Håkon as high over me as I over Paul Flida? Has Håkon an eye for unborn thoughts, that is lacking in me? Who stood so high as Harold Hårfager in the days when every headland had its king, and he said: Now they must fall—hereafter shall there be but one? He threw the old saga to the winds, and made a new saga. [*A pause; he paces up and down lost in thought; then he stops.*] Can one man take God's calling from another, as he takes weapons and gold from his fallen foe? Can a Pretender clothe himself in a king's life-task, as he can put on the kingly mantle? The oak that is felled to be a ship's timber, can it say: Nay, I will be the mast, I will take on me the task of the fir-tree, point upwards, tall and shining, bear the golden vane at my top, spread bellying white sails to the sunshine, and meet the eyes of all men, from afar!—No, no, thou heavy gnarled oak-trunk, thy place is down in the keel; t h e r e shalt thou lie, and do thy work, unheard-of and unseen by those aloft in the daylight; it is thou that shalt hinder the ship from being whelmed in the storm; while the mast with the golden vane and the bellying sail shall bear it forward toward the new, toward the unknown, toward alien strands and the saga of the future! [*Vehemently.*] Since Håkon uttered his great king-thought, I can see no other thought in the world but that only. If I cannot take it and act it out, I see no other thought to fight for. [*Brooding.*] And can I not make it mine? If I cannot, whence comes my great love for Håkon's thought?

JATGEIR.

[*Enters from the back.*] Forgive my coming, lord King——

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KING SKULE.

You come to my wish, Skald!

JATGEIR.

I overheard some townsfolk at my lodging talking darkly of——

KING SKULE.

Let that wait. Tell me, Skald: you who have fared far abroad in strange lands, have you ever seen a woman love another's child? Not only have kindness for it—'tis not that I mean; but l o v e it, love it with the warmest passion of her soul.

JATGEIR.

That do only those women who have no child of their own to love.

KING SKULE.

Only those women——?

JATGEIR.

And chiefly women who are barren.

KING SKULE.

Chiefly the barren——? They love the children of others with all their warmest passions?

JATGEIR.

That will oftentimes befall.

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KING SKULE.

And does it not sometimes befall that such a barren woman will slay another's child, because she herself has none?

JATGEIR.

Ay, ay; but in that she does unwisely.

KING SKULE.

Unwisely?

JATGEIR.

Ay, for she gives the gift of sorrow to her whose child she slays.

KING SKULE.

Think you the gift of sorrow is a great good?

JATGEIR.

Yes, lord.

KING SKULE.

[*Looks fixedly at him.*] Methinks there are two men in you, Icelander. When you sit amid the household at the merry feast, you draw cloak and hood over all your thoughts; when one is alone with you, sometimes you seem to be of those among whom one were fain to choose his friend. How comes it?

JATGEIR.

When you go to swim in the river, my lord, you would scarce strip you where the people pass by to church; you seek a sheltered privacy.

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KING SKULE.

True, true.

JATGEIR.

My soul has the like shamefastness; therefore I do not strip me when there are many in the hall.

KING SKULE.

Ha. [*A short pause.*] Tell me, Jatgeir, how come you to be a skald? Who taught you skaldcraft?

JATGEIR.

Skaldcraft cannot be taught, my lord.

KING SKULE.

Cannot be taught? How came it then?

JATGEIR.

The gift of sorrow came to me, and I was a skald.

KING SKULE.

Then 'tis the gift of sorrow the skald has need of?

JATGEIR.

I needed sorrow; others there may be who need faith, or joy—or doubt——

KING SKULE.

Doubt as well?

JATGEIR.

Ay; but then must the doubter be strong and sound.

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KING SKULE.

And whom call you the unsound doubter?

JATGEIR.

He who doubts of his own doubt.

KING SKULE.

[*Slowly.*] That, methinks, were death.

JATGEIR.

'Tis worse; 'tis neither day nor night.

KING SKULE.

[*Quickly, as if shaking off his thoughts.*] Where are my weapons? I will fight and act—not think. What was it you would have told me when you came?

JATGEIR.

'Twas what I noted in my lodging. The townsmen whisper together secretly, and laugh mockingly, and ask if we be well assured that King Hakon is in the west-land; there is somewhat they are in glee over.

KING SKULE.

They are men of Viken, and therefore against me.

JATGEIR.

They scoff because King Olaf's shrine could not be brought out to the mote-stead when you were chosen king; they say it boded ill.

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KING SKULE.

When next I come to Nidaros, the shrine s h a l l out! It shall stand under the open sky, though I should have to tear down St. Olaf's church and widen out the mote-stead over the spot where it stood.

JATGEIR.

That were a strong deed; but I shall make a song of it, as strong as the deed itself.

KING SKULE.

Have you many unmade songs within you, Jatgeir?

JATGEIR.

Nay, but many unborn; they are conceived one after the other, come to life, and are brought forth.

KING SKULE.

And if I, who am King and have the might, if I were to have you slain, would all the unborn skald-thoughts you bear within you die along with you?

JATGEIR.

My lord, it is a great sin to slay a fair thought.

KING SKULE.

I ask not if it be a s i n; I ask if it be p o s s i b l e!

JATGEIR.

I know not.

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KING SKULE.

Have you never had another skald for your friend, and has he never unfolded to you a great and noble song he thought to make?

JATGEIR.

Yes, lord.

KING SKULE.

Did you not then wish that you could slay him, to take his thought and make the song yourself?

JATGEIR.

My lord, I am not barren; I have children of my own; I need not to love those of other men. [*Goes.*

KING SKULE.

[*After a pause.*] The Icelander is in very deed a skald. He speaks God's deepest truth and knows it not—— *I* am as a barren woman. Therefore I love Håkon's kingly thought-child, love it with the warmest passion of my soul. Oh, that I could but adopt[1] it! It would die in my hands. Which were best, that it should die in my hands, or wax great in his? Should I ever have peace of soul if that came to pass? Can I forego all? Can I stand by and see Hakon make himself famous for all time! How dead and empty is all within me—and around me. No friend—; ah, the Icelander! [*Goes to the door and calls:*] Has the skald gone from the palace?

A GUARD.

[*Outside.*] No, my lord; he stands in the outer hall talking with the watch.

[1] *Knæsætte*, see note, p. 37.

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KING SKULE.

Bid him come hither. [*Goes forward to the table; presently* JATGEIR *enters.*] I cannot sleep, Jatgeir; 'tis all my great kingly thoughts that keep me awake, you see.

JATGEIR.

'Tis with the king's thoughts as with the skald's, I doubt not. They fly highest and grow quickest when there is night and stillness around.

KING SKULE.

Is it so with the skald's thoughts too?

JATGEIR.

Ay, lord; no song is born by daylight; it may be written down in the sunshine; but it makes itself in the silent night.

KING SKULE.

Who gave you the gift of sorrow, Jatgeir?

JATGEIR.

She whom I loved.

KING SKULE.

She died, then.

JATGEIR.

No, she deceived me.

KING SKULE.

And then you became a skald?

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JATGEIR.

Ay, then I became a skald.

KING SKULE.

[*Seizes him by the arm.*] What gift do *I* need to become a king?

JATGEIR.

Not the gift of doubt; else would you not question so.

KING SKULE.

What gift do I need?

JATGEIR.

My lord, you a r e a king.

KING SKULE.

Have y o u at all times full faith that you are a skald?

JATGEIR.

[*Looks silently at him for a while, and asks.*] Have you never loved?

KING SKULE.

Yes, once—burningly, blissfully, and in sin.

JATGEIR.

You have a wife.

KING SKULE.

Her I took to bear me sons.

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JATGEIR.

But you have a daughter, my lord—a gracious and noble daughter.

KING SKULE.

Were my daughter a son, I would not ask you what gift I need. [*Vehemently.*] I must have some one by me who sinks his own will utterly in mine—who believes in me unflinchingly, who will cling close to me in good hap and ill, who lives only to shed light and warmth over my life, and must die if I fall. Give me counsel, Jatgeir Skald!

JATGEIR.

Buy yourself a dog, my lord.

KING SKULE.

Would no man suffice?

JATGEIR.

You would have to search long for such a man.

KING SKULE.

[*Suddenly.*] Will y o u be that man to me, Jatgeir? Will y o u be a son to me? You shall have Norway's crown to your heritage—the whole land shall be yours, if you will be a son to me, and live for my life-work, and believe in me.

JATGEIR.

And what should be my warranty that I did not feign——?

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KING SKULE.

Give up your calling in life; sing no more songs, and then will I believe you!

JATGEIR.

No, lord—that were to buy the crown too dear.

KING SKULE.

Bethink you well—'tis greater to be a king than a skald.

JATGEIR.

Not always.

KING SKULE.

'Tis but your unsung songs you must sacrifice!

JATGEIR.

Songs unsung are ever the fairest.

KING SKULE.

But I must—I m u s t have one who can trust in me! Only one! I feel it—had I that one, I were saved!

JATGEIR.

Trust in yourself and you will be saved!

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Enters hastily.*] King Skule, look to yourself! Håkon Håkonsson lies off Elgjarness with all his fleet!

KING SKULE.

Off Elgjarness——! Then he is close at hand.

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JATGEIR.

Get we to arms then! If there be bloodshed to-night, I will gladly be the first to die for you!

KING SKULE.

Y o u , who would not live for me!

JATGEIR.

A man can die for another's life-work; but if he go on living, he must live for his own. [*Goes.*

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Impatiently.*] Your commands, my lord! The Birchlegs may be in Oslo this very hour.

KING SKULE.

'Twere best if we could fare to St. Thomas Beckett's grave; he has helped so many a sorrowful and penitent soul.

PAUL FLIDA.

[*More forcibly.*] My lord, speak not so wildly now; I tell you, the Birchlegs are upon us!

KING SKULE.

Let all the churches be opened, that we may betake us thither and find grace.

PAUL FLIDA.

You can crush all your foemen at one stroke, and yet would betake you to the churches!

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KING SKULE.

Yes, yes, keep all the churches open!

PAUL FLIDA.

Be sure Håkon will break sanctuary, when 'tis Vårbælgs he pursues.

KING SKULE.

That will he not; God will shield him from such a sin;—God always shields Håkon.

PAUL FLIDA.

[*In deep and sorrowful wrath.*] To hear you speak thus, a man could not but ask: Who is king in this land?

KING SKULE.

[*Smiling mournfully.*] Ay, Paul Flida, that is the great question: W h o is king in this land?

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Imploringly.*] You are soul-sick to-night, my lord; let me act for you.

KING SKULE.

Ay, ay, do so.

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Going.*] First will I break down all the bridges.

KING SKULE.

Madman! Stay!—Break down all the bridges! Know you what that means? *I* have assayed it;—beware of that!

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PAUL FLIDA.

What would you then, my lord?

KING SKULE.

I will talk with Håkon.

PAUL FLIDA.

He will answer you with a tongue of steel.

KING SKULE.

Go, go;—you shall learn my will anon.

PAUL FLIDA.

Every moment is precious! [*Seizes his hand.*] King Skule, let us break down all the bridges, fight like Wolves,[1] and trust in Heaven!

KING SKULE.

[*Softly.*] Heaven trusts not in me; I dare not trust in Heaven.

PAUL FLIDA.

Short has been the saga of the Vårbælgs.

[*Goes out by the back.*

KING SKULE.

A hundred cunning heads, a thousand mighty arms, are at my beck; but not a single loving, trusting heart. That is kingly beggary; no more, no less.

[1] *Varger*, the first part of the word *Vårbælg*.

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BÅRD BRATTE.

[*From the back.*] Two wayfarers from afar stand without, praying to have speech with you my lord.

KING SKULE.

Who are they?

BÅRD BRATTE.

A woman and a priest.

KING SKULE.

Let the woman and the priest approach.

[BÅRD *goes;* KING SKULE *seats himself, musing, on the right; presently there enters a black-robed woman; she wears a long cloak, a hood, and a thick veil, which conceals her face; a priest follows her, and remains standing by the door.*

KING SKULE.

Who are you?

THE WOMAN.

One you have loved.

KING SKULE.

[*Shaking his head.*] There lives no one who remembers that I have loved. Who are you, I ask?

THE WOMAN.

One who loves you.

KING SKULE.

Then are you surely one of the dead.

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THE WOMAN.

[*Comes close to him and says softly and passionately.*] Skule Bårdsson!

KING SKULE.

[*Rises with a cry.*] Ingeborg!

INGEBORG.

Do you know me now, Skule?

KING SKULE.

Ingeborg,—Ingeborg!

INGEBORG.

Oh, let me look at you—look long at you, so long! [*Seizes his hands; a pause.*] You fair, you deeply loved, you faithless man!

KING SKULE.

Take off that veil; look at me with the eyes that once were as clear and blue as the sky.

INGEBORG.

These eyes have been but a rain-clouded sky for twenty years; you would not know them again, and you shall never see them more.

KING SKULE.

But your voice is fresh and soft and young as ever!

INGEBORG.

I have used it only to whisper y o u r name, to imprint your greatness in a young heart, and to pray to

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the sinners' God for grace toward us twain, who have loved in sin.

KING SKULE.

You have done that?

INGEBORG.

I have been silent save to speak loving words of you;—therefore has my voice remained fresh and soft and young.

KING SKULE.

There lies a life-time between. Every fair memory from those days have I wasted and let slip——

INGEBORG.

It was your right.

KING SKULE.

And meantime y o u, Ingeborg, loving, faithful woman, have dwelt there in the north, guarding and treasuring your memories, in ice-cold loneliness!

INGEBORG.

It was my happiness.

KING SKULE.

And I could give you up to win might and riches! With you at my side, as my wife, I had found it easier to be a king.

INGEBORG.

God has been good to me in willing it otherwise. A soul like mine had need of a great sin, to arouse it to remorse and expiation.

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KING SKULE.

And now you come——?

INGEBORG.

As Andres Skialdarband's widow.

KING SKULE.

Your husband is dead!

INGEBORG.

On the way from Jerusalem.

KING SKULE.

Then has he atoned for the slaying of Vegard.

INGEBORG.

'Twas not therefore that my noble husband took the Cross.

KING SKULE.

Not therefore?

INGEBORG.

No; it was m y sin he took upon his strong, loving shoulders; 'twas t h a t he went to wash away in Jordan stream; 'twas for t h a t he bled.

KING SKULE.

[*Softly.*] Then he knew all.

INGEBORG.

From the first. And Bishop Nicholas knew it, for to him I confessed. And there was one other man that came to know it, though how I cannot guess.

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KING SKULE.

Who?

INGEBORG.

Vegard Væradal.

KING SKULE.

Vegard!

INGEBORG.

He whispered a mocking word of me into my husband's ear; and thereupon Andres Skialdarband drew his sword, and slew him on the spot.

KING SKULE.

He kept ward over her whom *I* betrayed and forgot. —And wherefore seek you me now?

INGEBORG.

To bring you the last sacrifice.

KING SKULE.

What mean you?

INGEBORG.

[*Points to the Priest who stands by the door.*] Look at him!—Peter, my son, come hither!

KING SKULE.

Your son——!

INGEBORG.

And y o u r s, King Skule!

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KING SKULE.

[*Half bewildered.*] Ingeborg!

[PETER *approaches in silent emotion, and throws himself before* KING SKULE.

INGEBORG.

Take him! For twenty years has he been the light and comfort of my life.—Now are you King of Norway; the King's son must enter on his heritage; I have no longer any right to him.

KING SKULE.

[*Raises him up, in a storm of joy.*] Here, to my heart, you whom I have yearned for so burningly! [*Presses him in his arms, lets him go, looks at him, and embraces him again.*] My son! My son! I have a son! Ha-ha-ha! who can stand against me now? [*Goes over to* INGEBORG *and seizes her hand.*] And you, you give him to me, Ingeborg! You take not back your word? You give him to me indeed?

INGEBORG.

Heavy is the sacrifice, and scarce had I strength to make it, but that Bishop Nicholas sent him to me, bearing a letter with tidings of Andres Skialdarband's death. 'Twas the Bishop that laid on me the heavy sacrifice, to atone for all my sin.

KING SKULE.

Then is the sin blotted out, and henceforth he is mine alone; is it not so, mine alone?

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INGEBORG.

Yes; but one promise I crave of you.

KING SKULE.

Heaven and earth, crave all you will!

INGEBORG.

He is pure as a lamb of God, as I now give him into your hands. 'Tis a perilous path that leads up to the throne; let him not take hurt to his soul. Hear you, King Skule: let not my child take hurt to his soul!

KING SKULE.

That I promise and swear to you!

INGEBORG.

[*Seizes his arm.*] From the moment you mark that his soul suffers harm, let him rather die!

KING SKULE.

Rather die! I promise and swear it!

INGEBORG.

Then shall I be of good cheer as I go back to Halogaland.

KING SKULE.

Ay, you may be of good cheer.

INGEBORG.

There will I repent and pray, till the Lord calls me. And when we meet before God, he shall come back to me pure and blameless.

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KING SKULE.

Pure and blameless! [*Turning to* PETER.] Let me look at you! Ay, your mother's features and mine; you are he for whom I have longed so sorely.

PETER.

My father, my great, noble father! Let me live and fight for you! Let your cause be mine; and be your cause what it may—I know that I am fighting for the right!

KING SKULE.

[*With a cry of joy.*] You trust in me! You trust in me!

PETER.

Immovably!

KING SKULE.

Then all is well; then am I surely saved! Listen: you shall cast off the cowl; the Archbishop shall loose you from your vows; the King's son shall wield the sword, shall go forward unwavering to might and honour.

PETER.

Together with you, my noble father! We will go together!

KING SKULE.

[*Drawing the youth close up to himself.*] Ay, together, we two alone!

INGEBORG.

[*To herself.*] To love, to sacrifice all and be forgotten, that is my saga.[1] [*Goes quietly out by the back.*

[1] As to the earlier text of this scene, see Brandes' *Ibsen and Björnson* (Heinemann, 1899), p. 29.

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KING SKULE.

Now shall a great king's-work be done in Norway! Listen, Peter, my son! We will awaken the whole people, and gather it into one; the man of Viken and the Trönder, the Halogalander and the Agdeman, the Uplander and the Sogndaleman, all shall be o n e great family! Then shall you see how the land will come to flourish!

PETER.

What a great and dizzy thought——

KING SKULE.

Do you grasp it?

PETER.

Yes—yes!—Clearly——!

KING SKULE

And have you faith in it?

PETER.

Yes, yes; for I have faith in you!

KING SKULE.

[*Wildly.*] Håkon Håkonsson must die.

PETER.

If you will it, then it is right that he die.

KING SKULE.

'Twill cost blood; but that we cannot heed!

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PETER.

The blood is not wasted that flows in your cause.

KING SKULE.

All the might shall be yours when I have built up the kingdom. You shall sit on the throne with the circlet on your brow, with the purple mantle flowing wide over your shoulders; all men in the land shall bow before you—— [*The sounds of distant horns*[1] *are heard.*] Ha! what was that? [*With a cry.*] The Birchleg host! What was it Paul Flida said——?

[*Rushes towards the back.*

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Enters and cries.*] The hour is upon us, King Skule!

KING SKULE.

[*Bewildered.*] The Birchlegs! King Håkon's host! Where are they?

PAUL FLIDA.

They are swarming in thousands down over the Ekeberg.

KING SKULE.

Sound the call to arms! Sound, sound! Give counsel; where shall we meet them?

PAUL FLIDA.

All the churches stand open for us.

[1] *Lur*, the long wooden horn still used among the mountains in Norway.

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KING SKULE.

'Tis of the Birchlegs I ask——?

PAUL FLIDA.

For them all the bridges stand open.

KING SKULE.

Unhappy man, what have you done!

PAUL FLIDA.

Obeyed my King!

KING SKULE.

My son! My son! Woe is me; I have lost your kingdom!

PETER.

No, you will conquer! So great a king's-thought cannot die!

KING SKULE.

Peace, peace! [*Horns and shouts are heard, nearer at hand.*] To horse! To arms! More is here at stake than the life and death of men!

[*Rushes out by the back; the others follow him.*

A street in Oslo. On each side, low wooden houses, with porches. At the back, St. Hallvard's churchyard, enclosed by a high wall with a gate. On the left, at the end of the wall, is seen the church, the chief portal of which stands open. It is still night; after a little, the day begins to dawn. The alarm-bell is ringing: far away on the right are heard battle-shouts and confused noises.

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KING SKULE'S HORNBLOWER.

[*Enters from the right, blows his horn, and shouts.*] To arms! To arms, all King Skule's men!

[*Blows his horn again, and proceeds on his way; presently he is heard blowing and shouting in the next street.*

A WOMAN.

[*Appears at a house door on the right.*] Great God of mercy, what is astir?

A TOWNSMAN.

[*Who has come out, half dressed, from a house on the other side of the street.*] The Birchlegs are in the town! Now will Skule have his reward for all his misdeeds.

ONE OF SKULE'S MEN.

[*Enters with some others, bearing their cloaks and weapons on their arms, from a side street on the left.*] Where are the Birchlegs?

ANOTHER OF SKULE'S MEN.

[*Coming from a house on the right.*] I know not!

THE FIRST.

Hist! Listen!—They must be down at the Geite-bridge!

THE SECOND.

Off to the Geite-bridge then!

[*They all rush out to the right; a townsman comes running in from the same side.*

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THE FIRST TOWNSMAN.

Hey, neighbour, whence come you?

THE SECOND TOWNSMAN.

From down at the Lo-river; there's ugly work there.

THE WOMAN.

St. Olaf and St. Hallvard! Is it the Birchlegs, or who is it?

THE SECOND TOWNSMAN.

Who else but the Birchlegs! King Håkon is with them; the whole fleet is laying in to the wharves; but he himself landed with his best men out at Ekeberg.

THE FIRST TOWNSMAN.

Then will he take revenge for the slaughter at Låka!

THE SECOND TOWNSMAN.

Ay, be sure of that.

THE FIRST TOWNSMAN.

See, see! The Vårbælgs are flying already!

A troop of SKULE'S *men enter in full flight, from the right.*

ONE OF THEM.

Into the church! None can stand against the Birchlegs as they lay about them to-night.

[*The troop rushes into the church and bars the door on the inside.*

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THE SECOND TOWNSMAN.

[*Looking out to the right.*] I see a standard far down the street; it must be King Håkon's.

THE FIRST TOWNSMAN.

See, see, how the Vårbælgs are running!

A second troop enters from the right.

ONE OF THE FUGITIVES.

Let us take to the church and pray for grace.
[*They rush at the door.*

SEVERAL VÅRBÆLGS.

'Tis barred! 'tis barred!

THE FIRST.

Up over Martestokke then!

ANOTHER.

Where is King Skule?

THE FIRST.

I know not. Away! yonder I see the Birchlegs' standard! [*They flee past the church, out to the left.*

HÅKON *enters from the right with his Standard-bearer,* GREGORIUS JONSSON, DAGFINN THE PEASANT, *and several other men.*

DAGFINN.

Hark to the war-cry! Skule is gathering his men behind the churchyard.

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AN OLD TOWNSMAN.

[*Calls from his porch, to* HÅKON.] Take heed for yourself, dear my lord; the Vårbælgs are fierce, now they are fighting for life.

HÅKON.

Is it you, old Guthorm Erlendsson? You have fought both for my father and for my grandfather.

THE TOWNSMAN.

Would to God I could fight for you as well.

HÅKON.

For that you are too old, and there is no need; men pour in upon me from all sides.

DAGFINN.

[*Pointing off over the wall to the right.*] There comes the Duke's standard!

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

The Duke himself! He rides his white war-horse.

DAGFINN.

We must hinder his passage through the gate here!

HÅKON.

Wind the horn, wind the horn! [*The Hornblower does so.*] You blew better, you whelp, when you blew for money on Bergen wharf.

[*The Hornblower winds another blast, louder than the first; many men come rushing in.*

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A VÅRBÆLG.

[*From the right, fleeing towards the church, pursued by a Birchleg.*] Spare my life! Spare my life!

THE BIRCHLEG.

Not though you sat on the altar! [*Cuts him down.*] 'Tis a costly cloak you wear, methinks 'twill fit me well. [*Is about to take the cloak, but utters a cry and casts away his sword.*] My lord King! Not another stroke will I strike for you

DAGFINN.

You say that in such an hour as this?

THE BIRCHLEG.

Not another stroke!

DAGFINN.

[*Cuts him down.*] Well, you may e'en let it alone.

THE BIRCHLEG.

[*Pointing to the dead Vårbælg.*] Methought I had done enough when I slew my own brother. [*Dies.*

HÅKON.

His brother!

DAGFINN.

What! [*Goes up to the Vårbæla's body.*

HÅKON.

Is it true?

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DAGFINN.

I fear me it is.

HÅKON.

[*Shaken.*] Here see we what a war we are waging. Brother against brother, father against son;—by God Almighty, this must have an end!

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

There comes the Duke, in full fight with Earl Knut's troop!

DAGFINN.

Bar the gate against him, king's men!

On the other side of the wall, the combatants come in sight. The Vårbælgs are forcing their way towards the left, driving the Birchlegs back, foot by foot. KING SKULE *rides his white war-horse, with his sword drawn.* PETER *walks at his side, holding the horse's bridle, and with his left hand uplifting a crucifix.* PAUL FLIDA *bears* SKULE'S *standard, which is blue, with a golden lion rampant, without the axe.*[1]

KING SKULE.

Cut them down! Spare no man! There is come a new heir[2] to the throne of Norway!

THE BIRCHLEGS.

A new heir, said he?

[1] The arms of Norway consist of a lion rampant, holding an axe.
[2] *Et nyt konge-emne.*

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HÅKON.

Skule Bårdsson, let us share the kingdom!

KING SKULE.

All or nought!

HÅKON.

Think of the Queen, your daughter!

KING SKULE.

I have a son, I have a son! I think of none but him!

HÅKON.

I too have a son;—if I fall the kingdom will be his!

KING SKULE.

Slay the King-child, wherever you find it! Slay it on the throne; slay it at the altar; slay it—slay it in the Queen's arms!

HÅKON.

There did you utter your own doom!

KING SKULE.

[*Slashing about him.*] Slay, slay without mercy! King Skule has a son! Slay, slay!

[*The fighting gradually passes away to the left.*

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

The Vårbælgs are hewing their way through!

DAGFINN.

Ay, but only to flee.

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GREGORIUS JONSSON.

Yes, by Heaven,—the other gate stands open; they are fleeing already!

DAGFINN.

Up towards Martestokke. [*Calls out.*] After them, after them, Earl Knut! Take vengeance for the slaughter at Låka!

HÅKON.

You heard it: he proclaimed my child an outlaw—my innocent child, Norway's chosen king after me!

THE KING'S MEN.

Ay, ay, we heard it!

HÅKON.

And what is the punishment for such a crime?

THE MEN.

Death!

HÅKON.

Then must he die! [*Raises his hand to make oath.*] Here I swear it: Skule Bårdsson shall die, wherever he be met on unconsecrated ground!

DAGFINN.

'Tis every true man's duty to slay him.

A BIRCHLEG.

[*From the left.*] Duke Skule has taken to flight!

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THE TOWNSFOLK.

The Birchlegs have conquered!

HÅKON.

What way?

THE BIRCHLEG.

Past Martestokke, up towards Eidsvold; most of them had horses waiting up in the streets, else had not one escaped with his life.

HÅKON.

Thanks be to God that has helped us yet again! Now may the Queen safely come ashore from the fleet.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Points off to the right.*] She has already landed, my lord; there she comes!

HÅKON.

[*To those nearest him.*] The heaviest task is yet before me; she is a loving daughter;—listen—no word to her of the danger that threatens her child. Swear to me, one and all, to keep ward over your King's son; but let her know nothing.

THE MEN.

[*Softly.*] We swear it.

MARGRETE.

[*Enters, with ladies and attendants, from the right.*] Hakon, my husband! Heaven has shielded you! you have conquered and are unhurt!

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HÅKON.

Yes, I have conquered. Where is the child?

MARGRETE.

On board the King's ship, in the hands of trusty men.

HÅKON.

Go more of you thither. [*Some of the men go.*

MARGRETE.

Håkon, where is—Duke Skule?

HÅKON.

He has made for the Uplands.

MARGRETE.

He lives, then!—My husband, may I thank God that he lives?

HÅKON.

[*In painful agitation.*] Hear me, Margrete: you have been a faithful wife to me, you have followed me through good hap and ill, you have been unspeakably rich in love;—now must I cause you a heavy sorrow; I am loath to do it; but I am King, therefore must I——

MARGRETE.

[*In suspense.*] Has it to do with—the Duke?

HÅKON.

Yes. No bitterer lot could befall me than to live my life far from you; but if you think it must be so after

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what I now tell you—if you feel that you can no longer sit by my side, no longer look at me without turning pale —well, we must even part—live each alone—and I shall not blame you for it.

MARGRETE.

Part from you! How can you think such a thought? Give me your hand——!

HÅKON.

Touch it not!—It has even now been lifted in oath——

MARGRETE.

In oath?

HÅKON.

An oath that set its sacred seal upon a death-warrant.

MARGRETE.

[*With a shriek.*] My father! Oh, my father!

[*Totters; two women rush forward to support her.*

HÅKON.

Yes, Margrete—his King has doomed your father to death.

MARGRETE.

Then well I know he has committed a greater crime than when he took the kingly title.

HÅKON.

That has he;—and now, if you feel that we must part, so let it be.

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MARGRETE.

[*Coming close to him, firmly.*] We can never part! I am your wife, nought else in the world but your wife!

HÅKON.

Are you strong enough? Did you hear and understand all? I have doomed your father.

MARGRETE.

I heard and understood. You have doomed my father.

HÅKON.

And you ask not to know what was his crime?

MARGRETE.

'Tis enough that y o u know it.

HÅKON.

But it was to death that I doomed him!

MARGRETE.

[*Kneels before the* KING, *and kisses his hand.*] My husband and noble lord, your doom is just!

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ACT FIFTH

A room in the palace at Nidaros. The entrance door is on the right; in front, on the same side, a window; to the left a smaller door. It is after night-fall. PAUL FLIDA, BÅRD BRATTE, *and several of* KING SKULE'S *principal followers are standing at the window and looking upward.*

A MAN-AT-ARMS.

How red it glows!

A SECOND.

It stretches over half the sky, like a flaming sword.

BÅRD BRATTE.

Holy King Olaf, what bodes such a sign of dread?

AN OLD VÅRBÆLG.

Assuredly it bodes a great chief's death.

PAUL FLIDA.

Håkon's death, my good Vårbælgs. He is lying out in the fiord with his fleet; we may look for him in the town to-night. This time, 'tis our turn to conquer!

BÅRD BRATTE.

Trust not to that; there is little heart in the host now.

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THE OLD VÅRBÆLG.

And reason enough, in sooth; ever since the flight from Oslo has King Skule shut himself in, and will neither see nor speak with his men.

THE FIRST MAN-AT-ARMS.

There are those in the town who know not whether to believe him alive or dead.

PAUL FLIDA.

The King must out, however sick he may be. Speak to him, Bård Bratte—the safety of all is at stake.

BÅRD BRATTE.

It avails not; I have spoken to him already.

PAUL FLIDA.

Then must I try what I can do. [*Goes to the door on the left, and knocks.*] My lord King, you must take the helm in your own hands; things can no longer go on in this fashion.

KING SKULE.

[*Within.*] I am sick, Paul Flida.

PAUL FLIDA.

What else can you look for? You have eaten nought these two days; you must nourish and strengthen you——

KING SKULE.

I am sick.

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PAUL FLIDA.

By the Almighty, 'tis no time for sickness. King Håkon lies out in the fiord, and may at any time be upon us here in Nidaros.

KING SKULE.

Strike him down for me! Slay him and the King-child.

PAUL FLIDA.

You must be with us, my lord!

KING SKULE.

No, no, no,—you are surest of fortune and victory when I am not there.

PETER.

[*Enters from the right; he is in armour.*] The townsfolk are ill at ease; they flock together in great masses before the palace.

BÅRD BRATTE.

Unless the King speak to them, they will desert him in the hour of need.

PETER.

Then must he speak to them. [*At the door on the left.*] Father! The Trönders, your trustiest subjects, will fall away from you if you give them not courage.

KING SKULE.

What said the skald?

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PETER.

The skald?

KING SKULE.

The skald who died for my sake at Oslo. A man cannot give what he himself does not possess, he said.

PETER.

Then neither can you give away the kingdom; for it is mine after you!

KING SKULE.

Now I will come!

PAUL FLIDA.

God be praised.

KING SKULE.

[*Comes forward in the doorway; he is pale and haggard; his hair has grown very grey.*] You shall not look at me! I will not have you look at me now that I am sick! [*Goes up to* PETER.] Take from you the kingdom, you say? Great God in heaven, what was I about to do!

PETER.

Oh, forgive me;—I know that what you do is ever the right.

KING SKULE.

No, no, not hitherto; but now I will be strong and sound—I will act!

LOUD SHOUTS.

[*Without, on the right.*] King Skule! King Skule!

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KING SKULE.

What is that?

BÅRD BRATTE.

[*At the window.*] The townsmen are flocking together; the whole courtyard is full of people;—you must speak to them.

KING SKULE.

Do I look like a king? Can I speak now?

PETER.

You must, my noble father!

KING SKULE.

Well, be it so. [*Goes to the window and draws the curtain aside, but lets it go quickly and starts back in terror.*] There hangs the flaming sword over me again!

PAUL FLIDA.

It bodes that the sword of victory is drawn for you.

KING SKULE.

Ah, were it but so! [*Goes to the window and speaks out.*] Trönders, what would you? Here stands your King.

A TOWNSMAN.

[*Without.*] Leave the town! The Birchlegs will burn and slay if they find you here.

KING SKULE.

We must all hold together. I have been a gracious King to you; I have craved but small war-tax——

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A MAN'S VOICE.

[*Down in the crowd.*] What call you all the blood, then, that flowed at Låka and Oslo?

A WOMAN.

Give me my betrothed again!

A BOY.

Give me my father and my brother!

ANOTHER WOMAN.

Give me my three sons, King Skule!

A MAN.

He is no King; homage has not been done him on St. Olaf's shrine!

MANY VOICES.

No, no—no homage has been done him on St. Olaf's shrine! He is no King!

KING SKULE.

[*Shrinks behind the curtain.*] No homage——! No king!

PAUL FLIDA.

'Twas a dire mischance that the shrine was not brought forth when you were chosen.

BÅRD BRATTE.

Should the townsfolk desert us, we cannot hold Nidaros if the Birchlegs come.

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KING SKULE.

And they will desert us, so long as homage has not been done to me on the Saint's shrine.

PETER.

Then let the shrine be brought forth, and take our homage now!

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Shaking his head.*] How should that be possible?

PETER.

Is aught impossible, where he is concerned? Sound the call for the folkmote, and bring forth the shrine!

SEVERAL OF THE MEN.

[*Shrinking back.*] Sacrilege!

PETER.

No sacrilege!—Come, come! The monks are well disposed towards King Skule; they will agree——

PAUL FLIDA.

That they will not; they dare not, for the Archbishop.

PETER.

Are you King's men, and will not lend your aid when so great a cause is at stake! Good, there are others below of better will. My father and King, the monks shall give way; I will pray, I will beseech; sound

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the summons for the folkmote; you shall bear your kingship rightfully. [*Rushes out to the right.*

KING SKULE.

[*Beaming with joy.*] Saw you him! Saw you my gallant son! How his eyes shone! Yes, we will all fight and conquer. How strong are the Birchlegs?

PAUL FLIDA.

Not stronger than that we may master them, if but the townsfolk hold to us!

KING SKULE.

They s h a l l hold to us. We must all be at one now and put an end to this time of dread. See you not that 'tis Heaven's command that we should end it? Heaven is wroth with all Norway for the deeds that have so long been doing. A flaming sword glows night by night in the sky; women swoon and bear children in the churches; a frenzy creeps abroad among priests and monks, causing them to run through the streets and proclaim that the last day is come. Ay, by the Almighty, this shall be ended at one stroke!

PAUL FLIDA.

What are your commands?

KING SKULE.

All the bridges shall be broken down!

PAUL FLIDA.

Go, and let all the bridges be broken.

[*One of the Men-at-arms goes out to the right.*

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KING SKULE.

Gather all our men upon the foreshore; not one Birch-leg shall set foot in Nidaros.

PAUL FLIDA.

Well spoken, King.

KING SKULE.

When the shrine is borne forth, let the horn sound to the folkmote. The host and the townsfolk shall be called together.

PAUL FLIDA.

[*To one of the men.*] Go forth and bid the hornblower wind his horn in all the streets. [*The man goes.*

KING SKULE.

[*Addresses the people from the window.*] Hold fast to me, all my sorrowing people. There shall come peace and light over the land once more, as in Håkon's first glad days, when the fields yielded two harvests every summer. Hold fast to me; believe in me and trust to me; 'tis that I need so unspeakably. I will watch over you and fight for you; I will bleed and die for you, if need be; but fail me not, and doubt not——! [*Loud cries, as though of terror, are heard among the people.*] What is that?

A WILD VOICE.

Atone! Atone!

BÅRD BRATTE.

[*Looks out.*] 'Tis a priest possessed of the devil!

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PAUL FLIDA.

He is tearing his cowl to shreds and scourging himself with a whip.

THE VOICE.

Atone, atone! The last day is come.

MANY VOICES.

Flee, flee! Woe upon Nidaros! A deed of sin!

KING SKULE.

What has befallen?

BÅRD BRATTE.

All flee, all shrink away as though a wild beast were in their midst.

KING SKULE.

Yes, all flee. [*With a cry of joy.*] Ha! it matters not. We are saved! See, see—King Olaf's shrine stands in the middle of the courtyard.

PAUL FLIDA.

King Olaf's shrine!

BÅRD BRATTE.

Ay, by Heaven—there it stands!

KING SKULE.

The monks are true to me; so good a deed have they never done before!

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PAUL FLIDA.

Hark! the call to the folkmote!

KING SKULE.

Now shall lawful homage be done to me.

PETER.

[*Enters from the right.*] Take on you the kingly mantle; now stands the shrine out yonder.

KING SKULE.

Then you have saved the kingdom for me and for yourself; and tenfold will we thank the pious monks for yielding.

PETER.

The monks, father—you have nought to thank them for.

KING SKULE.

'Twas not they that helped you?

PETER.

They laid the ban of the Church on whoever should dare to touch the holy thing.

KING SKULE.

The Archbishop then! At last he gives way.

PETER

The Archbishop hurled forth direr curses than the monks.

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KING SKULE.

Ah, then I see that I still have trusty men. You here, who should have been the first to serve me, stood terrified and shrank back—but down in the crowd have I friends who for my sake fear not to take so great a sin upon their souls.

PETER.

You have not o n e trusty man who dared to take the sin upon him.

KING SKULE.

Almighty God! has then a miracle come to pass? Who bore out the holy thing?

PETER.

I, my father!

KING SKULE.

[*With a shriek.*] You!

THE MEN.

[*Shrink back appalled.*] Church-robber!

[PAUL FLIDA, BÅRD BRATTE, *and one or two others go out.*

PETER.

The deed had to be done. No man's faith is sure ere homage be lawfully done to you. I begged, I besought the monks; it availed not. Then I broke open the church door; none dared to follow me. I sprang up to the high altar, gripped the handle, and pressed hard with my knees; 'twas as though an unseen power gave me more than human strength. The shrine came loose, I

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dragged it after me down the nave, while the ban moaned like a storm high up under the vaultings. I dragged it out of the church; all fled and shrank from me. When I came to the middle of the courtyard the handle broke; here it is! [*Holds it aloft.*

KING SKULE.

[*Quietly, appalled.*] Church-robber.

PETER.

For your sake; for the sake of your great king's-thought! You will wipe out the sin; all that is evil you will wipe away. Light and peace will follow you; a glorious day will dawn over the land—what matter, then, if there went a storm-night before it?

KING SKULE.

There was as 'twere a halo round your head when your mother brought you to me; now I see in its stead the lightnings of the ban.

PETER.

Father, father, think not of me; be not afraid for my woe or weal. Is it not your will I have fulfilled?—how can it be accounted to me for a crime?

KING SKULE.

I hungered for your faith in me, and your faith has turned to sin.

PETER.

[*Wildly.*] For your sake, for your sake! Therefore God dare not deny to blot it out!

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KING SKULE.

"Pure and blameless," I swore to Ingeborg—and he scoffs at heaven!

PAUL FLIDA.

[*Entering.*] All is in uproar! The impious deed has struck terror to your men; they flee into the churches.

KING SKULE.

They s h a l l out; they m u s t out!

BÅRD BRATTE.

[*Entering.*] The townsfolk have risen against you; they are slaying the Vårbælgs wherever they find them, on the streets or in the houses!

A MAN-AT-ARMS.

[*Entering.*] The Birchlegs are sailing up the river!

KING SKULE.

Summon all my men together! None must fail me here!

PAUL FLIDA.

They will not come; they are benumbed with dread.

KING SKULE.

[*Despairingly.*] But I c a n n o t fall now! My son must not die with a deadly sin upon his soul!

PETER.

Think not of me; 'tis you alone that are to be thought of. Let us make for Indherred; there all men are true to you!

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KING SKULE.

Ay, to flight! Follow me, whoso would save his life!

BÅRD BRATTE.

What way?

KING SKULE.

Over the bridge!

PAUL FLIDA.

All bridges are broken down, my lord.

KING SKULE.

Broken down——! All the bridges broken, say you?

PAUL FLIDA.

Had you broken them down at Oslo, you might have let them stand at Nidaros.

KING SKULE.

We must over the river none the less;—we have our lives and our souls to save! To flight! To flight!

[HE *and* PETER *rush out to the left.*

BÅRD BRATTE.

Ay, better so than to fall at the hands of the townfolk and the Birchlegs.

PAUL FLIDA.

In God's name, then, to flight! [*All follow* SKULE.

The room stands empty for a short time; a distant and confused noise is heard from the streets; then a troop of armed townsmen rushes in by the door on the right.

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A TOWNSMAN.

Here! He must be here!

ANOTHER.

Slay him!

MANY.

Slay the church-robber too!

A SINGLE ONE.

Go carefully! They may yet bite!

THE FIRST TOWNSMAN.

No need; the Birchlegs are already coming up the street.

A TOWNSMAN.

[*Entering.*] Too late—King Skule has fled!

MANY.

Whither? Whither?

THE NEW-COMER.

Into one of the churches, methinks; they are full of the Vårbælgs.

THE FIRST TOWNSMAN.

Then let us seek for him; great thanks and reward will King Håkon give to the man who slays Skule.

ANOTHER.

Here come the Birchlegs.

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A THIRD.

King Håkon himself!

MANY OF THE CROWD.

[*Shout.*] Hail to King Håkon Håkonsson!

HÅKON.

[*Enters from the right, followed by* GREGORIUS JONSSON, DAGFINN THE PEASANT, *and many others.*] Ay, now are you humble, you Trönders; you have stood against me long enough.

THE FIRST TOWNSMAN.

[*Kneeling.*] Mercy, my lord! Skule Bårdsson bore so hardly on us!

ANOTHER.

[*Also kneeling.*] He compelled us, else had we never followed him.

THE FIRST.

He seized our goods and forced us to fight for his unrighteous cause.

THE SECOND.

Alas, noble lord, he has been a scourge to his friends no less than to his foes.

MANY VOICES.

Ay, ay,—Skule Bårdsson has been a scourge to the whole land.

DAGFINN.

That, at least, is true enough.

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HÅKON.

Good; with you townsfolk I will speak later; 'tis my purpose to punish sternly all transgressions; but first there are other things to be thought of. Knows any man where Skule Bårdsson is?

MANY.

In one of the churches, lord!

HÅKON.

Know you that for certain?

THE TOWNSMEN.

Ay, there are all the Vårbælgs.

HÅKON.

[*Softly to* DAGFINN.] He must be found; set a watch on all the churches in the town.

DAGFINN.

And when he is found, he must straightway be slain.

HÅKON.

[*Softly.*] Slain? Dagfinn, Dagfinn, how heavy a deed it seems!

DAGFINN.

My lord, you swore it solemnly at Oslo.

HÅKON.

And all men in the land will call for his death. [*Turns to* GREGORIUS JONSSON *and says, unheard by the others*]

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Go; you were once his friend; seek him out and prevail on him to fly the land.

GREGORIUS.

[*Joyfully.*] You will suffer it, my lord!

HÅKON.

For the sake of my gentle, well-beloved wife.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

But if he should n o t flee? If he will not or cannot?

HÅKON.

Then, in God's name, I may not spare him; then must my kingly word be fulfilled. Go!

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

I go, and shall do my utmost. Heaven grant I may succeed. [*Goes out by the right.*

HÅKON.

You, Dagfinn, go with trusty men down to the King's ship; you shall conduct the Queen and her child up to Elgesæter[1] convent.

DAGFINN.

My lord, think you she will be safe there?

HÅKON.

Nowhere safer. The Vårbælgs have shut themselves up in the churches, and she has besought to be sent thither; her mother is at Elgesæter.

[1] *Elgesæter* = Elk-châlet.

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DAGFINN.

Ay, ay, that I know.

HÅKON.

Greet the Queen most lovingly from me; and greet Lady Ragnhild also. You may tell them that so soon as the Vårbælgs shall have made submission and been taken to grace, all the bells in Nidaros shall be rung, for a sign that there has come peace in the land once more.—You townsfolk shall reckon with me to-morrow, and punishment shall be meted to each according to his misdeeds. [*Goes with his men.*

THE FIRST TOWNSMAN.

Woe upon us to-morrow!

THE SECOND.

We have a long reckoning to pay.

THE FIRST.

We, who have stood against Håkon so long—who bore our part in acclaiming Skule when he took the kingly title.

THE SECOND.

Who gave Skule both ships and war-tribute—who bought all the goods he seized from Håkon's thanes.

THE FIRST.

Ay, woe upon us to-morrow!

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A TOWNSMAN.

[*Rushes in from the left.*] Where is Håkon? Where is the King?

THE FIRST.

What would you with him?

THE NEW-COMER.

Bring him great and weighty tidings.

MANY.

What tidings?

THE NEW-COMER.

I tell them to no other than the King himself.

MANY.

Ay, tell us, tell us!

THE NEW-COMER.

Skule Bårdsson is fleeing up toward Elgesæter.

THE FIRST.

It cannot be! He is in one of the churches.

THE NEW-COMER.

No, no; he and his son crossed over the river in a skiff.

THE FIRST.

Ha, then we can save us from Håkon's wrath!

THE SECOND.

Ay, let us forthwith give him to know where Skule is.

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THE FIRST.

Nay, better than that; we will say nought, but ourselves go up to Elgesæter and slay Skule.

THE SECOND.

Ay, ay—that will we!

A THIRD.

But did not many Vårbælgs go with him over the river?

THE NEW-COMER.

No, there were but few men in the boat.

THE FIRST.

We will arm us as best we can. Oh, now are we townsfolk safe enough! Let no man know what we are about; we are enough for the task!—And now, away to Elgesæter.

ALL.

[*Softly.*] Ay, away to Elgesæter!

[*They go out to the left, rapidly but cautiously.*

A fir-wood on the hills above Nidaros. It is moonlight, but the night is misty, so that the background is seen indistinctly, and sometimes scarcely at all. Tree-stumps and great boulders lie round about. KING SKULE, PETER, PAUL FLIDA, BÅRD BRATTE, *and other* VÅRBÆLGS *come through the wood from the left.*

PETER.

Come hither and rest you, my father.

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KING SKULE.

Ay, let me rest, rest. [*Sinks down beside a stone.*

PETER.

How goes it with you?

KING SKULE.

I am hungry! I am sick, sick! I see dead men's shadows!

PETER.

[*Springing up.*] Help here—bread for the King!

BÅRD BRATTE.

Here is every man king; for life is at stake. Stand up, Skule Bårdsson, if you be king! Lie not there to rule the land.

PETER.

If you scoff at my father, I will kill you.

BÅRD BRATTE.

I shall be killed whatever betides; for me King Håkon will have no grace; for I was his thane, and deserted him for Skule's sake. Think of somewhat that may save us. No deed so desperate but I will risk it now.

A VÅRBÆLG.

Could we but get over to the convent at Holm?

PAUL FLIDA.

Better to Elgesæter.

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BÅRD BRATTE.

[*With a sudden outburst.*] Best of all to go down to Håkon's ship and bear away the King-child.

PAUL FLIDA.

Are you distraught?

BÅRD BRATTE.

No, no; 'tis our one hope, and easy enough to do. The Birchlegs are ransacking every house, and keeping watch on all the churches; they think none of us can have taken flight, since all the bridges are broken. There can be but few men on board the ships; when once we have his heir in our power, Håkon must grant us peace, else will his child die with us. Who will go with me to save our lives?

PAUL FLIDA.

Not I, if they are to be saved in such wise.

SEVERAL.

Not I! Not I!

PETER.

Ha, but if it were to save my father——!

BÅRD BRATTE.

If you will go with me, come. First I go down to Hladehammer; there lies the troop we met at the bottom of the hill; they are the wildest daredevils of all the Vårbælgs; they had swum the river, knowing that they would find no grace in the churches. They are the lads for a raid on the King's ship! Which of you will follow me?

SOME.

I! I!

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PETER.

Mayhap I too; but first must I see my father into safe shelter.

BÅRD BRATTE.

Ere daybreak will we make speed up the river. Come, here goes a short way downwards towards Hlade.

[*He and some others go out to the right.*

PETER.

[*To* PAUL FLIDA.] Let not my father know aught of this; he is soul-sick to-night, we must act for him. There is safety in Bård Bratte's deed; ere daybreak shall the King-child be in our hands.

PAUL FLIDA.

To be slain, most like. See you not that it is a sin——

PETER.

Nay, it cannot be a sin; for my father doomed the child in Oslo. Sooner or later it must die, for it blocks my father's path;—my father has a great king's-thought to carry through; it matters not who or how many fall for its sake.

PAUL FLIDA.

Hapless for you was the day you came to know that you were King Skule's son. [*Listening.*] Hist!—cast you flat to the ground; there come people this way.

[*All throw themselves down behind stones and stumps; a troop of people, some riding, some on foot, can be seen indistinctly through the mist and between the trees; they come from the left, and pass on to the right.*

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PETER.

'Tis the Queen!

PAUL FLIDA.

Ay; she is talking with Dagfinn the Peasant. Hush!

PETER.

They are making for Elgesæter. The King-child is with them!

PAUL FLIDA.

And the Queen's ladies.

PETER.

But only four men! Up, up, King Skule—now is your kingdom saved!

KING SKULE.

My kingdom? 'Tis dark, my kingdom—like the angel's that rose against God.

A party of MONKS *comes from the right.*

A MONK.

Who speaks there? Is it King Skule's men.

PAUL FLIDA.

King Skule himself.

THE MONK.

[*To* SKULE.] God be praised that we met you, dear lord! Some townsmen gave us to know that you had

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taken the upward path, and we are no less unsafe than you in Nidaros.

PETER.

You have deserved death, you who denied to give forth St. Olaf's shrine.

THE MONK.

The Archbishop forbade it; but none the less we would fain serve King Skule; we have ever held to him. See, we have brought with us robes of our Order for you and your men; put them on, and then can you easily make your way into one convent or another, and can seek to gain grace of Håkon.

KING SKULE.

Ay, let me put on the robe; my son and I must stand on consecrated ground. I will to Elgesæter.

PETER.

[*Softly, to* PAUL FLIDA.] See that my father comes safely thither.

PAUL FLIDA.

Bethink you that there are Birchlegs at Elgesæter.

PETER.

But four men; you may easily deal with them, and once inside the convent walls they will not dare to touch you. I will seek BÅRD BRATTE.

PAUL FLIDA.

Nay, do not so!

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PETER.

Not on the King's ship, but at Elgesæter, must the outlaws save the kingdom for my father.

[*Goes quickly out to the right.*

A VÅRBÆLG.

[*Whispering to another.*] Go you to Elgesæter with Skule?

THE OTHER.

Hist; no; the Birchlegs are there!

THE FIRST.

Neither will I go; but say nought to the rest.

THE MONK.

And now away, two and two,—one spearman and one monk.

ANOTHER MONK.

[*Sitting on a stump behind the rest.*] I will guide King Skule.

KING SKULE.

Know you the way?

THE MONK.

The broad way.

THE FIRST MONK.

Haste you; let us take different paths, and meet outside the convent gate.

[*They go out among the trees, to the right; the fog lifts and the comet shows itself, red and glowing, through the hazy air.*

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KING SKULE.

Peter, my son——! [*Starts backwards.*] Ha, there is the flaming sword in heaven!

THE MONK.

[*Sitting behind him on the stump.*] And here am I!

KING SKULE.

Who are you?

THE MONK.

An old acquaintance.

KING SKULE.

Paler man have I never seen.

THE MONK.

But you know me not?

KING SKULE.

'Tis you that are to lead me to Elgesæter.

THE MONK.

'Tis I that will lead you to the throne.

KING SKULE.

Can you do that?

THE MONK.

I can, if you but will it.

KING SKULE.

And by what means?

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THE MONK.

By the means I have used before;—I will take you up into a high mountain and show you all the glory of the world.

KING SKULE.

All the glory of the world have I seen ere now, in dreams of temptation.

THE MONK.

'Twas I that gave you those dreams.

KING SKULE.

Who are you?

THE MONK.

An envoy from the oldest Pretender in the world.

KING SKULE.

From the oldest Pretender in the world?

THE MONK.

From the first Earl, who rose against the greatest kingdom, and himself founded a kingdom that shall endure beyond doomsday.

KING SKULE.

[*Shrieks.*] Bishop Nicholas!

THE MONK.

[*Rising.*] Do you know me now? We were friends of yore,
And 'tis you that have brought me back;
Once the self-same galley our fortunes bore,

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And we sailed on the self-same tack.
At our parting I quailed, in the gloom and the blast;
For a hawk in his talons had gripped my soul fast;
I besought them to chant and to ply the bell,
And I bought me masses and prayers as well,—
They read fourteen, though I'd paid but for seven;
Yet they brought me no nearer the gates of heaven.

KING SKULE.

And you come from down yonder——?

THE MONK.

Yes, from the kingdom down yonder I'm faring;
The kingdom men always so much miscall.
I vow 'tis in nowise so bad after all,
And the heat, to my thinking, is never past bearing.

KING SKULE.

And it seems you have learnt skald-craft, old Bagler-chieftain!

THE MONK.

Not only skald-craft, but store of Latinity!
Once my Latin was not over strong, you know;
Now few can beat it for ease and flow.
To take any station in yonder vicinity,
Ay, even to pass at the gate, for credential
A knowledge of Latin is well-nigh essential.
You can't but make progress with so many able
And learned companions each day at the table,—
Full fifty ex-popes by my side carouse, and
Five hundred cardinals, skalds seven thousand.

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KING SKULE.

Greet your Master and give him my thanks for his friendship. Tell him he is the only king who sends help to Skule the First of Norway.

THE MONK.

Hear now, King Skule, what brings me to you—
My Master's henchmen down there are legion,
And each up here is allotted a region;
They gave Norway to me, as the place I best knew.
Håkon Håkonsson serves not my Master's will;
We hate him, for he is our foeman still—
So he must fall, leaving you at the helm,
The sole possessor of crown and realm.

KING SKULE.

Ay, give me the crown! When once I have that, I will rule so as to buy myself free again.

THE MONK.

Ay, that we can always talk of later——
We must seize the time if we'd win the fight.
King Håkon's child sleeps at Elgesæter;
Could you once wrap him in the web of night,
Then like storm-swept motes will your foes fly routed,
Then your victory's sure and your kingship undoubted!

KING SKULE.

Think you so surely that the victory were mine?

THE MONK.

All men in Norway are sighing for rest;
The king with an heir[1] is the king they love best—

[1] *Et kongs-emne.*

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A son to succeed to the throne without wrangling;
For the people are tired of this hundred-years' jangling.
Rouse you, King Skule! one great endeavour!
The foe must perish to-night or never!
See, to the northward how light it has grown,
See how the fog lifts o'er fiord and o'er valley—
There gather noiselessly galley on galley—
Hark! men are marching with rumble and drone!
One word of promise, and all is your own—
Hundreds of glittering sails on the water,
Thousands of warriors hurtling to slaughter.

KING SKULE.

What word would you have?

THE MONK.

For raising you highest, my one condition
Is just that you follow your heart's ambition;
All Norway is yours, to the kingship I'll speed you,
If only you vow that your son shall succeed you!

KING SKULE.

[*Raising his hand as if for an oath.*] My son shall—— [*Stops suddenly, and breaks forth in terror.*] The church-robber! All the might to him! Ha! now I understand;—you seek for his soul's perdition! Get thee behind me, get thee behind me! [*Stretches out his arms to heaven.*] Oh have mercy on me, thou to whom I now call for help in my sorest need!

[*He falls prone to the earth.*

THE MONK.

Accurséd! He's slipped through my fingers at last—
And I thought of a surety I held him so fast!

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But the Light, it seems, had a trick in store
That I knew not of—and the game is o'er.
Well, well; what matters a little delay?
Perpetuum mobile's well under way;
My might is assured through the years and the ages,
The haters of light shall be still in my wages;
In Norway my empire for ever is founded,
Though it be to my subjects a riddle unsounded.
[*Coming forward.*
While to their life-work Norsemen set out
Will-lessly wavering, daunted with doubt,
While hearts are shrunken, minds helplessly shivering,
Weak as a willow-wand wind-swept and quivering,—
While about one thing alone they're united,
Namely, that greatness be stoned and despited,—
When they seek honour in fleeing and falling
Under the banner of baseness unfurled,—
Then Bishop Nicholas 'tends to his calling,
The Bagler-Bishop's at work in the world!
[*He disappears in the fog among the trees.*

KING SKULE.

[*After a short pause, half rises and looks around.*] Where is he, my black comrade? [*Springs up.*] My guide, my guide, where are you? Gone!—No matter; now I myself know the way, both to Elgesæter and beyond. [*Goes out to the right.*

The courtyard of Elgesæter Convent. To the left lies the chapel, with an entrance from the courtyard; the windows are lighted up. Along the opposite side of the space stretch some lower buildings; in the back, the convent wall with a strong gate, which is locked.

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It is a clear moonlight night. Three Birchleg Chiefs stand by the gate; MARGRETE, LADY RAGNHILD, *and* DAGFINN THE PEASANT *come out from the chapel.*

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Half to herself.*] King Skule had to flee into the church, you say! He, he, a fugitive! begging at the altar for peace—begging for his life mayhap—oh no, no, that could never be; but God will punish you who dared to let it come to this!

MARGRETE.

My dear, dear mother, curb yourself; you know not what you say; 'tis your grief that speaks.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Hear me, ye Birchlegs! 'Tis Håkon Håkonsson that should lie before the altar, and beseech King Skule for life and peace.

A BIRCHLEG.

It ill beseems loyal men to listen to such words.

MARGRETE.

Bow your heads before a wife's sorrow!

LADY RAGNHILD.

King Skule doomed! Look to yourselves, look to yourselves all of you, when he regains his power.

DAGFINN.

That will never be, Lady Ragnhild.

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MARGRETE.

Hush, hush!

LADY RAGNHILD.

Think you Håkon Håkonsson dare let his doom be fulfilled if the King should fall into his hands?

DAGFINN.

King Håkon himself best knows whether a king's oath can be broken.

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*To* MARGRETE.] And this man of blood have you followed in faith and love! Are y o u your father's child? May the wrath of heaven——! Go from me, go from me!

MARGRETE.

Blessed be your lips, although now they curse me.

LADY RAGNHILD.

I must down to Nidaros and into the church to find King Skule. He sent me from him when he sat victorious on the throne; then, truly, he had no need of me—now will he not be wroth if I come to him. Open the gate for me; let me go to Nidaros!

MARGRETE.

My mother, for God's pity's sake——!

[*A loud knocking at the convent gate.*

DAGFINN.

Who knocks?

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KING SKULE.

[*Without.*] A king.

DAGFINN.

Skule Bårdsson.

LADY RAGNHILD.

King Skule.

MARGRETE.

My father!

KING SKULE.

Open, open!

DAGFINN.

We open not here to outlaws.

KING SKULE.

'Tis a king who knocks, I tell you; a king who has no roof over his head; a king whose life is forfeit if he reach not consecrated ground.

MARGRETE.

Dagfinn, Dagfinn, 'tis my father.

DAGFINN.

[*Goes to the gate and opens a small shutter.*] Come you with many men to the convent?

KING SKULE.

With all the men that were true to me in my need

DAGFINN.

And how many be they?

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KING SKULE.

Fewer than one.

MARGRETE.

He is alone, Dagfinn.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Heaven's wrath fall upon you if you deny him sanctuary!

DAGFINN.

In God's name, then!

[*He opens the gate; the Birchlegs respectfully uncover their heads.* KING SKULE *enters the courtyard.*

MARGRETE.

[*Throwing herself on his neck.*] My father! My dear, unhappy father!

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Interposing wildly between him and the Birchlegs.*] Ye who feign reverence for him, ye will betray him, like Judas. Dare not to come near him! Ye shall not lay a finger on him while I live!

DAGFINN.

Here he is safe, for he is on holy ground.

MARGRETE.

And not one of all your men had the heart to follow you this night!

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KING SKULE.

Both monks and spearmen brought me on the way; but they slipped from me one by one, for they knew there were Birchlegs at Elgesæter. Paul Flida was the last to leave me; he came with me to the convent gate; there he gave me his last hand-grip, in memory of the time when there were Varbælgs in Norway.

DAGFINN.

[*To the Birchlegs.*] Get you in, chieftains, and set you as guards about the King-child; I must to Nidaros to acquaint the King that Skule Bårdsson is at Elgesæter; in so weighty a matter 'tis for him to act.

MARGRETE.

Oh, Dagfinn, Dagfinn, have you the heart for that?

DAGFINN.

Else should I ill serve King and land. [*To the men.*] Lock the gates after me, watch over the child, and open to none until the King be come. [*Softly to* SKULE.] Farewell, Skule Bårdsson—and God grant you a blessed end.

[*Goes out by the gate; the Birchlegs close it after him, and go into the chapel.*

LADY RAGNHILD.

Ay, let Håkon come; I will not loose you; I will hold you straitly and tenderly in my arms, as I never held you before.

MARGRETE.

Oh, how pale you are—and aged; you are cold.

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KING SKULE.

I am not cold—but I am weary, weary.

MARGRETE.

Come in then, and rest you——

KING SKULE.

Yes, yes; 'twill soon be time to rest.

SIGRID.

[*From the chapel.*] You come at last, my brother!

KING SKULE.

Sigrid! you here?

SIGRID.

I promised that we should meet when you were fain of me in your sorest need.

KING SKULE.

Where is your child, Margrete?

MARGRETE.

He sleeps, in the sacristy.

KING SKULE.

Then is our whole house gathered at Elgesæter to-night.

SIGRID.

Ay, gathered after straying long and far.

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KING SKULE.

Håkon Håkonsson alone is wanting.

MARGRETE AND LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Cling about him, in an outburst of sorrow.*] My father!—My husband!

KING SKULE.

[*Looking at them, much moved.*] Have you loved me so deeply, you two? I sought after happiness abroad, and heeded not the home wherein I might have found it. I pursued after love through sin and guilt, little dreaming that 'twas mine already, in right of God's law and man's. —And you, Ragnhild, my wife, you, against whom I have sinned so deeply, you take me to your warm, soft heart in the hour of my sorest need; you can tremble and be afraid for the life of the man who has never cast a ray of sunshine upon your path.

LADY RAGNHILD.

Have y o u sinned? Oh, Skule, speak not so; think you I should ever dare accuse you! From the first I was too mean a mate for you, my noble husband; there can rest no guilt on any deed of yours.

KING SKULE.

Have you believed in me so surely, Ragnhild?

LADY RAGNHILD.

From the first day I saw you.

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KING SKULE.

[*With animation.*] When Håkon comes, I will beg grace of him! You gentle, loving women,—oh, but it is fair to live!

SIGRID.

[*With an expression of terror.*] Skule, my brother! Woe to you if you stray from the path this night.

[*A loud noise without; immediately afterwards, a knocking at the gate.*

MARGRETE.

Hark, hark! Who comes in such haste?

LADY RAGNHILD

Who knocks at the gate?

VOICES.

[*Without.*] Townsfolk from Nidaros! Open! We know that Skule Bårdsson is within!

KING SKULE.

Ay, he is within; what would ye with him?

NOISY VOICES.

[*Without.*] Come out, come out! Death to the evil man!

MARGRETE.

You townsfolk dare to threaten that?

A SINGLE VOICE.

King Håkon doomed him at Oslo.

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ANOTHER.

'Tis every man's duty to slay him!

MARGRETE.

I am the Queen; I command you to depart!

A VOICE.

'Tis Skule Bårdsson's daughter, and not the Queen, that speaks thus.

ANOTHER.

You have no power over life and death; the King has doomed him!

LADY RAGNHILD.

Into the church, Skule! For God's mercy's sake, let not the bloodthirsty caitiffs approach you!

KING SKULE.

Ay, into the church; I would not fall at the hands of such as these. My wife, my daughter; meseems I have found peace and light; oh, I cannot lose them again so soon! [*Moves towards the chapel.*

PETER.

[*Without, on the right.*] My father, my king! Now will you soon have the victory!

KING SKULE.

[*With a shriek.*] He! He!

[*Sinks down upon the church steps.*

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LADY RAGNHILD.

Who is it?

A TOWNSMAN.

[*Without.*] See, see! the church-robber climbs over the convent roof!

OTHERS.

Stone him! Stone him!

PETER.

[*Appears on a roof to the right, and jumps down into the yard.*] Well met again, my father!

KING SKULE.

[*Looks at him aghast.*] You—I had forgotten you——! Whence come you?

PETER.

[*Wildly.*] Where is the King-child?

MARGRETE.

The King-child!

KING SKULE.

[*Starts up.*] Whence come you, I ask?

PETER.

From Hladehammer; I have given Bård Bratte and the Varbælgs to know that the King-child lies at Elgesæter to-night.

MARGRETE.

O God!

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KING SKULE.

You have done that! And now——?

PETER.

He is gathering together his men, and they are hasting up to the convent.—Where is the King-child, woman?

MARGRETE.

[*Who has placed herself before the church door.*] He sleeps in the sacristy!

PETER.

'Twere the same if he slept on the altar! I have dragged out St. Olaf's shrine—I fear not to drag out the King-child as well.

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Calls to* SKULE.] And he it is you have loved so deeply!

MARGRETE.

Father, father! How could you forget us all for his sake?

KING SKULE.

He was pure as a lamb of God when the penitent woman gave him to me;—'tis his faith in me has made him what he now is.

PETER.

[*Without heeding him.*] The child must out! Slay it, slay it in the Queen's arms,—that was King Skule's word in Oslo!

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MARGRETE.

Oh shame, oh shame!

PETER.

A saint might do it unsinning, at my father's command! My father is King; for the great king's-thought is his!

TOWNSMEN.

[*Knocking at the gate.*] Open! Come out, you and the church-robber, else will we burn the convent dow

KING SKULE.

[*As if seized by a strong resolution.*] The great king's-thought! 'Tis t h a t has poisoned your young loving soul! Pure and blameless I was to give you back; 'tis faith in me that drives you thus wildly from crime to crime, from deadly sin to deadly sin! Oh, but I can save you yet: I can save us all! [*Calls toward the background.*] Wait, wait, ye townsmen without there: I come!

MARGRETE.

[*Seizing his hand in terror.*] My father! what would you do?

LADY RAGNHILD.

[*Clinging to him with a shriek.*] Skule!

SIGRID.

[*Tears them away from him, and calls with wild, radiant joy.*] Loose him, loose him, women;—now his thought puts forth wings!

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KING SKULE.

[*Firmly and forcibly, to* PETER.] You saw in me the heaven-chosen one,—him who should do the great king's-work in the land. Look at me better, misguided boy! The rags of kingship I have decked myself withal, they were borrowed and stolen—now I put them off me, one by one.

PETER.

[*In dread.*] My great, my noble father, speak not thus!

KING SKULE.

The king's-thought is Håkon's, not mine; to him alone has the Lord granted the power that can act it out. You have believed in a lie; turn from me, and save your soul.

PETER.

[*In a broken voice.*] The king's-thought is Håkon's!

KING SKULE.

I yearned to be the greatest in the land. My God! my God! behold, I abase myself before thee, and stand as the least of all men.

PETER.

Take me from the earth, O Lord! Punish me for all my sin; but take me from the earth; for here am I homeless now! [*Sinks down upon the church steps.*

KING SKULE.

I had a friend who bled for me at Oslo. He said: A man can die for another's life-work; but if he is to go

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on living, he must live for his own.—I have no life-work to live for, neither can I live for Håkon's,—but I can die for it.

MARGRETE.

Nay, nay, that shall you never do!

KING SKULE.

[*Takes her hand, and looks at her tenderly.*] Do you love your husband, Margrete?

MARGRETE.

Better than the whole world.

KING SKULE.

You could endure that he should doom me; but could you also endure that he should let the doom be fulfilled?

MARGRETE.

Lord of heaven, give me strength!

KING SKULE.

Could you, Margrete?

MARGRETE.

[*Softly and shuddering.*] No, no—we should have to part,—I could never see him more!

KING SKULE.

You would darken the fairest light of his life and of yours;—be at peace, Margrete,—it shall not be needful.

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LADY RAGNHILD.

Flee from the land, Skule; I will follow you whithersoever you will.

KING SKULE.

[*Shaking his head.*] With a mocking shade between us?—To-night have I found you for the first time; there must fall no shade between me and you, my silent, faithful wife;—therefore must we not seek to unite our lives on this earth.

SIGRID.

My kingly brother! I see you need me not;—I see you know what path to take.

KING SKULE.

There are men born to live, and men born to die. My desire was ever thitherward where God's finger pointed not the way for me; therefore I never saw my path clear, till now. My peaceful home-life have I wrecked; I can never win it back again. My sins against Håkon I can atone by freeing him from a kingly duty which must have parted him from his dearest treasure. The townsfolk stand without; I will not wait for King Håkon! The Varbælgs are near; so long as I live they will not swerve from their purpose; if they find me here, I cannot save your child, Margrete.—See, look upwards! See how it wanes and pales, the flaming sword that has hung over my head! Yes, yes,—God has spoken and I have understood him, and his wrath is appeased. Not in the sanctuary of Elgesæter will I cast me down and beg for grace of an earthly king;—I must into the mighty church roofed with the vault of

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stars and 'tis the King of Kings I must implore for grace and mercy over all my life-work.

SIGRID.

Withstand him not! Withstand not the call of God! The day dawns; it dawns in Norway and it dawns in his restless soul! Have not we trembling women cowered long enough in our secret rooms, terror-stricken and hidden in the darkest corners, listening to all the horror that was doing without, listening to the bloody pageant that stalked over the land from end to end! Have we not lain pale and stone-like in the churches, not daring to look forth, even as Christ's disciples lay in Jerusalem on the Great Good Friday when the Lord was led by to Golgotha! Use thy wings, and woe to them who would bind thee now!

LADY RAGNHILD.

Fare forth in peace, my husband; fare thither where no mocking shade shall stand between us, when we meet. [*Hastens into the chapel.*

MARGRETE.

My father, farewell, farewell,—a thousand times farewell! [*Follows* LADY RAGNHILD.

SIGRID.

[*Opens the church door and calls in.*] To your knees, all ye women! Assemble yourselves in prayer; send up a message in song to the Lord, and tell him that now Skule Bårdsson comes penitent home from his rebellious race on earth.

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KING SKULE.

Sigrid, my faithful sister, greet King Håkon from me; tell him that even in my last hour I know not whether he be king-born; but this I know of a surety: he it is whom God has chosen.

SIGRID.

I will bear him your greeting.

KING SKULE.

And yet another greeting must you bear. There dwells a penitent woman in the north, in Halogaland; tell her that her son has gone before; he went with me when there was great danger for his soul.

SIGRID.

That will I.

KING SKULE.

Tell her, it was not with the heart he sinned; pure and blameless shall she surely meet him again.

SIGRID.

That will I. [*Points towards the background.*] Hark! they are breaking the lock!

KING SKULE.

[*Points towards the chapel.*] Hark! they are singing loud to God of salvation and peace!

SIGRID.

Hark again! All the bells in Nidaros are ringing——!

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KING SKULE.

[*Smiles mournfully.*] They are ringing a king to his grave.

SIGRID.

Nay, nay, they ring for your true crowning! Farewell, my brother, let the purple robe of blood flow wide over your shoulders; under it may all sin be hidden. Go forth, go into the great church and take the crown of life.

[*Hastens into the chapel. Chanting and bell-ringing continue during what follows.*

VOICES.

[*Outside the gate.*] The lock has burst! Force us not to break the peace of the church!

KING SKULE.

I come.

THE TOWNSMEN.

And the church-robber must come too!

KING SKULE.

Ay, the church-robber shall come too. [*Goes over to* PETER.] My son, are you ready?

PETER.

Ay, father, I am ready.

KING SKULE.

[*Looks upwards.*] O God, I am a poor man, I have but my life to give; but take that, and keep watch over Håkon's great king's-thought.—See now, give me your hand.

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PETER.

Here is my hand, father.

KING SKULE.

And fear not for that which is now to come.

PETER.

Nay, father, I fear not, when I go with you.

KING SKULE.

A safer way have we two never trodden together. [*He opens the gate; the* TOWNSMEN *stand without with upraised weapons.*] Here are we; we come of our own free will;—but strike him not in the face.

[*They pass out, hand in hand; the gate glides to.*

A VOICE.

Aim not, spare not;—strike them where ye can.

KING SKULE'S VOICE.

'Tis base to deal thus with chieftains.

[*A short noise of weapons; then a heavy fall is heard; all is still for a moment.*

A VOICE.

They are dead, both of them!

[*The* KING'S *horn sounds.*

ANOTHER VOICE.

There comes King Håkon with all his guard!

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THE CROWD.

Hail Håkon Håkonsson; now have you no longer any foemen.

GREGORIUS JONSSON.

[*Stops a little before the corpses.*] So I have come too late! [*Enters the convent yard.*

DAGFINN.

It had been ill for Norway had you come sooner. [*Calls out.*] In here, King Håkon!

HÅKON.

[*Stopping.*] The body lies in my way!

DAGFINN.

If Håkon Håkonsson would go forward, he must pass over Skule Bårdsson's body!

HÅKON.

In God's name then!

[*Steps over the corpse and comes in.*

DAGFINN.

At last you can set about your king's-work with free hands. In there are those you love; in Nidaros they are ringing in peace in the land; and yonder he lies who was your direst foe.

HÅKON.

All men misjudged him, reading not his secret.

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DAGFINN.

His secret?

HÅKON.

[*Seizes him by the arm, and says softly.*] Skule Bårdsson was God's step-child on earth; that was the secret.

[*The song of the women is heard more loudly from the chapel; all the bells are still ringing in Nidaros.*

THE END.

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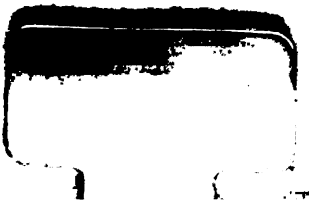
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